Table of Contents

1. Allegiances
2. Chapter 1
3. Chapter 2
4. Chapter 3
5. Chapter 4
6. Chapter 5
7. Chapter 6
8. Chapter 7
9. Chapter 8
10. Chapter 9
11. Chapter 10
12. Chapter 11
13. Chapter 12
14. Chapter 13
15. Chapter 14
16. Chapter 15
17. Chapter 16
18. Chapter 17
19. Chapter 18
20. Chapter 19
21. Chapter 20
22. Chapter 21
23. Chapter 22
24. Chapter 23
25. Chapter 24
26. Chapter 25
27. Chapter 26
28. Chapter 27
29. Chapter 28
30. Chapter 29
31. Chapter 30
32. Chapter 31
33. Chapter 32
34. Chapter 33

35. Chapter 34
36. Chapter 35
37. Chapter 36
38. Chapter 37
39. Chapter 38
40. Chapter 39
41. Chapter 40
42. Chapter 41
43. Chapter 42
44. Chapter 43
45. Chapter 44
46. Author's Note

Allegiances

~COPYRIGHT STATEMENT REGARDING MY WARRIORS FICS~
I am putting this here simply because it has become quite an issue lately. Please DO NOT use my original characters/clans/concepts in any of your Warriors fics. (This does not include warriors cats with the same names. I understand coincidences if we happened to pick the same names for our characters.) I work hard on my novels, and it is upsetting to witness a circumstance where the author feels they need to "borrow" ideas/characters from me because they're not creative enough. Simply stated, the Warriors world is big and complex enough for an author to be able to create his or her own characters/clans/plot. Thank you for your understanding.

~STATEMENT REGARDING GRAMMATICAL ERRORS AND COMMENTS~

Please REFRAIN from continually correcting typos and grammatical errors. I am a grammar nazi myself, and I understand some of you are too, but I have several published works and do not have time to correct EVERY error. Unless the error severely limits your understanding of the story, I will not be taking immediate action to fix these typos. Please REFRAIN from telling me "cats can't cry" and "cats can't blush" etc. These novels are a work of FICTION. I know cats can't cry and perform human-like characteristics; however, this is a work of fiction and is written in a way to convey emotion. I am sick and tired of getting comments like these because they detract from my work and make it seem like you care more about correcting typos/ (sorry) being a pompous know-it-all than reading and enjoying a work. Don't be surprised if I get sassy/sarcastic with you in the comments. I ask you refrain from making such comments on my work.

RIVERCLAN (Only cats mentioned in the series):

LEADER--Goldstar: golden tabby she-cat

DEPUTY--Troutfin: calico she-cat with green eyes

MEDICINE CAT--Mothwing: calico she-cat
~APPRENTICE: Spotpaw: small brown she-cat

WARRIORS:

Dusktail: black tom with yellow eyes

Snowheart: white she-cat with one blue and one green eye

Brownpelt: brown tabby tom with green eyes
Mate: Suntail

Rosepettle: white she-cat with green eyes

Spotteddusk: white tom with black spots and green eyes

Suntail: golden tabby she-cat
Mate: Brownpelt

Runningblaze: white tom

APPRENTICES:

Flamepaw: ginger tabby she-cat with green eyes

Barkpaw: brown tabby tom with green eyes

Volepaw: tortoiseshell tom

Ella: gray tabby she-cat

ELDERS:

No-Claw: gray tom with yellow eyes and no noticeable claws

CATS OUTSIDE THE CLANS:

Tigerstripe: brown tabby tom with green eyes

Krait: Siamese she-cat

Dusty: gray tom

Korosu: Javanese she-cat with red eyes

Swampstar: mucky-colored tom with green eyes

ANIMALS:

Rain: ginger fox

Lupin: Timber wolf

Breeze: white wolf

Lupin: mutt

Rose: Newfoundland puppy

Holly: Newfoundland puppy

Chapter 1

Flamepaw slowly opened her eyes as a beam of sunlight shined down on her. By opening her eyes, she found herself embracing yet another chilly day of leaf-fall. From the entrance of the apprentice den, she noticed the scattered crisp leaves along the camp floor and the multi-colored trees.

Beside her, Barkpaw slept soundly, unaware that the other apprentices were rising to begin their day. Smiling at him, Flamepaw shoved him lightly until the tom's eyes slowly opened.

"Five more minutes," he muttered, waving his brown striped tail in her face.

"If Rosepettle has your head then it's not my fault," Flamepaw warned him, rising and padding outside of the camp.

"Wait! Wait, I'm coming!" Barkpaw called, suddenly rising to his feet.

Flamepaw giggled as he joined her in camp.

It had been a few moons since her return to RiverClan, and since then, she and Barkpaw had grown incredibly in their friendship. While Flamepaw still remained close friends with Rosepettle, Spotteddusk, Mothwing, and the others from the quest, it was nice to have a cat her age to hang out with. She'd never made much friends with the other cats her age.

Flamepaw glanced up, noticing Goldstar chatting with Troutfin, a calico she-cat. Since their return, Mountainheart had fallen ill, rumored to be from the stress of running the clan durign Goldstar's absence, and he had unfortunately passed away. Troutfin was then hailed the new deputy of RiverClan, whom Flamepaw much preferred to Mountainheart.

As Flamepaw watched them, she searched Goldstar's expression for any looks of concern. There had not been a single threat from Korosu since the kitnapping and their return to RiverClan, which Flamepaw thought greatly suspicious. Ella and Volekit had recovered and were now apprentices in RiverClan along with Flamepaw and Barkpaw. Unfortunately, none of the other captured kits had been so fortunate to return.

"You think Troutfin will send us on patrol today?" Barkpaw

wondered as they came to the fresh-kill pile.

Flamepaw shrugged, grabbing a fresh trout from the top of the kill pile. She brought it to Barkpaw to begin to share. Though when she took a bite, she found the fish to be slimy and not as juicy as the fish in the summer had been.

"What's the matter?" Barkpaw asked, noticing her gross expression.

"The fish has been getting worse and worse," Flamepaw muttered.

"Just you wait until leaf-bare," came a gentle purr behind her.

Flamepaw turned, noticing her mother, Suntail, approaching her. She had aged with time too, as some gray had begun to appear on her muzzle.

"How are you?" Suntail asked, sitting down next to Flamepaw. She wrapped her light ginger tail around her daughter and purred eagerly.

"What did you mean about leaf-bare?" Barkpaw wondered. Since becoming an apprentice in RiverClan, he had learned how to fish and swim, both of which had been difficult tasks for him. Still, he soon began to get used to eating fish as his main diet, though Flamepaw noticed he still tended to prefer a mouse to a fish every now and then.

"The river freezes over when the snow falls," Suntail explained. "RiverClan is at its hungriest at that time, for we can't fish, and forest prey is scarce."

"Gee, you're really making me look forward to it," Barkpaw grumbled.

Flamepaw rolled her eyes. "You'll be fine, Barkpaw. After all, you learned how to hunt forest prey. We have limited training in that."

"I've survived many leaf-bares," Suntail explained. "You'll be fine."

"What about greencough?" Barkpaw wondered.

Suntail frowned. "Greencough is a problem, but let's be grateful our clan members are healthy right now."

Flamepaw nodded, finishing the rest of the trout.

Suntail padded off and joined Brownpelt near the center of the camp. Flamepaw waved to her father as she passed by, seeking her own mentor, Dusktail.

Glancing up, she noticed Mothwing, and her new apprentice, Spotpaw. Mothwing had so far proved to be an excellent medicine cat, and it seemed Spotpaw was learning much from her. Unfortunately, this kept Flamepaw from seeing her friend often. Every moment with her was sacred.

"Hey, Mothwing!" Flamepaw called, rushing over to her calico friend. Barkpaw quickly followed behind, frustrated Flamepaw had run off so quickly.

Flamepaw came to a halt beside Mothwing and the small brown she-cat.

"What's up?" Flamepaw asked.

Mothwing grinned warmly. "Shouldn't you be out doing apprentice duties?"

Flamepaw shrugged. "I wanted to see how you were doing."

"Mothwing is teaching me so much!" Spotpaw exclaimed. "We're going to collect some parsley in the forest!"

"Sounds fun," Flamepaw said to Spotpaw, remembering how Mothwing had taken her out with Rosepettle moons ago. She'd been through a lot since then. Flamepaw still would have nightmares at night of Korosu's flashing red eyes, Daisyflower's bloody body, Clawkit's limp body sprawled across rocks. She shuddered thinking about it.

"Flamepaw, Dusktail's calling," Barkpaw called.

"Have a nice day, Flamepaw," Mothwing purred, walking off with her apprentice.

"You too," Flamepaw replied, turning around and departing. She padded with Barkpaw towards her mentor, departing at the last moment as he went off with Rosepettle. Spotteddusk stood beside Rosepettle, chatting eagerly.

Obviously the two had become mates, which did not bother Flamepaw as much as it would have moons ago. Her crush on him had faded during the journey, and she was glad to see Rosepettle so happy.

She turned, noticing Snowheart chatting happily with her son, Runningblaze. Since their reunitement, they had a lot to catch up on, Flamepaw guessed, and the mother and son spent much of their time together.

"Are you ready to train?" Dusktail wondered.

Flamepaw nodded, her thoughts breaking. She padded with Dusktail into RiverClan's woods, wondering what it was they would

be doing today.

When Flamepaw had first returned, she was afraid her warrior ceremony would be postponed due to her prolonged absence, but Dusktail had been impressed by all the skills she had learned from her quest, and she guessed it would only be a moon or so now until she became a full warrior.

"What are we learning today?" Flamepaw wondered.

"Battle moves," Dusktail announced as he moved past the river. Flamepaw sighed, wishing she could go for a nice swim in the river. It would calm her down. Perhaps she'd even catch some fish to bring back to the clan.

Dusktail led her to a clearing into the woods where crisp and colored leaves coated the forest floor.

"Guess it's not a good day to practice hunting," Flamepaw assumed, the crunching of leaves echoing throughout the forest.

"Perhaps if you avoided them we might be able to practice some hunting," Dusktail suggested, carefully stepping over the leaves with his quiet black paws.

Flamepaw shrugged and faced her mentor, waiting for his further instructions.

"We're going to practice first moves," Dusktail announced. "It is your job to attack me, but keep your claws sheathed, please," he said, turning to reveal his healing clawmarks from Flamepaw's accidental attack.

Flamepaw blushed. "Oh, sorry about that," she muttered, turning away. She hadn't been thinking at the time. Dusktail should've been proud she'd been so into fighting. Then again, she had imagined she were back on her quest, fighting evil cats, and she had accidentally let her claws unsheathe.

"It's fine. Mothwing fixed it up," Dusktail explained.

"Ready?" Flamepaw asked.

"If you tell me you're attacking it won't be much of a surprise, will it?" Dusktail wondered.

"Sorry," Flamepaw mewed.

Taking a deep breath, she lunged at Dusktail. The tom quickly moved out of the way and pinned her, snarling. Flamepaw clawed at his belly and rolled out from underneath him. Unfortunately, Dusktail managed to catch her in time, and she was tripped, landing face-down in the dirt.

Dusktail stood over her, snarling. For a moment, he wasn't

Dusktail anymore, but Korosu grinning maliciously at Flamepaw, her red eyes flashing.

Flamepaw, not knowing what to do, froze. Tears gathered in her eyes, and she cowered in fear.

"No! No! Don't hurt me!" Flamepaw shrieked.

Korosu then vanished, and Dusktail stepped off of Flamepaw, confused. "I'm not going to hurt you," he admitted.

Flamepaw rubbed her eyes with her paws. "I-I'm sorry. I thought..." She fell quiet.

"Maybe this isn't a good idea," Dusktail decided. "Let's try hunting."

"A-are you sure?" Flamepaw wondered.

Dusktail nodded.

Flamepaw, embarassed, followed her mentor through the woods. She hadn't meant to come off as a coward. Ever since her return, it'd been harder to fight. It hadn't been the first time she'd had a vision like that, and she sensed Dusktail was aware of this too. He'd been becoming more tolerable towards her problem. Still, Flamepaw didn't want this to get in the way of her training. She felt it was holding her back and keeping her from working to her best potential.

Flamepaw sighed and continued training, wishing she wouldn't have to live in suspense or fear over something she couldn't control.

Chapter 2

A few days came and passed since Flamepaw's embarrassing encounter with Duskpelt. So far her mentor had not brought up the incident, but Flamepaw still felt bad each time she thought of it. She supposed it wasn't her fault that her past was haunting her, but she still felt like it was her job to control it.

After a fitful rest, Flamepaw awoke to find Barkpaw standing over her, gently poking her with his paw.

"Hey, it's time to get up," he told her.

Flamepaw slowly blinked. "I'll be up in a second," she said. "Want to pick us out some good fish from the fresh-kill pile?"

"I'll see what I can find," Barkpaw offered, scampering off.

Flamepaw smiled, glad to have a good friend. At times she'd been able to talk to him about her fears from the quest, and Barkpaw had shared some of his own. She guessed it had bonded them together. Still, that had been moons ago. She doubted he still knew of the terrors she encountered.

As Flamepaw came out of the den into sunlight, she noticed her father chatting with one of the other warriors. For some strange reason, she was drawn to him and padded up to his side.

Brownpelt, still engaged in conversation, did not look down.

"Dad," Flamepaw called.

Brownpelt glanced down at her then back at the RiverClan warrior, wrapping up their conversation. Then, he turned back to her, grinning.

"Good morning, sweetheart," he purred. "How are you doing?"

"Fine," Flamepaw replied, though she really believed she was not. Neither him nor her mother knew about all the dangers she'd encountered on her journey. The only cats who really knew about her nightmares were Barkpaw and Duskpelt, and Duskpelt had just guessed from their daily training, not because she'd told him.

"What's the plan for today?" he asked.

"More training," Flamepaw explained.

"Oh," Brownpelt spoke, nodding. "And it's going well?"

Flamepaw nodded.

"Well, it'll be good to see you named a warrior soon," he purred, poking at her lightly with his tail.

"I'm excited," she admitted. She could imagine the day now. She'd be standing on top of that log, with Barkpaw by her side, perhaps. Goldstar would stand beside her and bestow upon her the warrior name which StarClan had decided for her. Then, she'd be a full RiverClan warrior! Such joy would she feel!

"Well, Troutfin's assigned me to patrol. I better go," Brownpelt explained.

Flamepaw frowned. She knew her father had been upset when Troutfin had been assigned deputy instead of him. Still, Flamepaw guessed that was one of her father's flaws. He thought too highly of himself and took it upon himself when he didn't get his way. Since Troutfin was named deputy, he'd stepped up his duties, perhaps trying to bribe Troutfin if she were to become leader in the future.

Flamepaw guessed that maybe she possessed some of this stubbornness too. After all, she had blamed herself for all the mishaps on the quest, even though they couldn't have been avoided. And she'd taken it upon herself to try harder, even if it meant a hard and vigorous task lay ahead of her.

"Hey, Dad," Flamepaw called as he began to pad away.

Brownpelt turned, impatiently waiting.

"If-if you weren't busy, maybe we could fish later? Or just walk in the woods?" Flamepaw suggested.

Brownpelt paused for a second, his green eyes deep in thought. "I did offer to do evening patrol. We'll see."

Flamepaw nodded, though her heart sank. It was nearly the same as when she was a kit. He still didn't have enough time for her.

"Flamepaw! Hurry up!" Barkpaw called from the fresh-kill pile.

Flamepaw turned away from her father and padded to the tom, seeing he had a medium-sized fish waiting for her. She sat down across from him and bit into the fish, glad it had a better taste than the one she'd eaten a few days earlier.

"I'm going to miss fish," Barkpaw admitted.

Flamepaw eyed him curiously. "Didn't you say you preferred forest prey?"

"I don't know. I think I've grown towards it," Barkpaw explained, his green eyes gleaming with joy.

Flamepaw laughed, finishing up the rest of the fish. "What are the plans for today?"

"You'll be coming with us, Flamepaw," came a voice behind Barkpaw. Flamepaw glanced up to see Rosepettle stand beside Barkpaw, her feathery tail wrapped around him. "I hope that's okay."

Flamepaw nodded her head vigorously. Occasionally, she and Duskpelt would train alongside Rosepettle and Barkpaw, with them being of such a close age and all and in the same stage of training.

"Is Duskpelt okay with it?" Flamepaw wondered.

The white she-cat nodded. "I just spoke with him. We'll be fishing in the river today. Not sure how much longer we'll get to do that. Let's see how much fish we can bring back to the clan."

"I'll bring back enough to double the size of the fresh-kill pile!" Barkpaw declared.

Rosepettle chuckled. "We'll see about that. Come on, Flamepaw. Duskpelt is waiting by the border of camp."

Flamepaw trotted with them towards the camp entrance where Duskpelt stood, waiting patiently for his apprentice.

"Ready to go?" he asked.

Flamepaw nodded, and soon they were off. She trotted alongside Barkpaw in the forest as Rosepettle and Duskpelt led the way to the river. Flamepaw grinned as they padded along, admiring the colorful views of the forest.

Soon enough, they came to the edge of the rushing river. Rain that had fallen during leaf-fall had allowed it to fill again, though shortly, the cold winds of leaf-bare would cause it to freeze over. Flamepaw tried not to think of leaf-bare and instead only focused on the current rushing river.

"Here we are!" Rosepettle exclaimed, sitting down next to the river side. Barkpaw joined his mentor, and Flamepaw sat between him and Dusktail.

"So, what do we win?" Barkpaw asked.

"What do you mean?" Dusktail wondered.

"What does the cat who catches the most fish win?" Barkpaw asked.

"Experience," Rosepettle purred.

Barkpaw groaned, and Flamepaw giggled, her eyes focusing on the river. She glanced into the rippling current, keeping her eyes peeled for the sight of any movement. She hoped to catch several fish today.

Catching fish wasn't hard for her anymore after the quest. She had to learn how to hunt during it, and Duskpelt had admired her new hunting skills. Still, she wanted to impress Duskpelt and the others.

A gleam of silver came by, but before Flamepaw could scoop it up, Duskpelt already had the fish in his grasp and killed it easily. He dropped it by his side, grinning.

"Hey, let the apprentices catch some, will you?" Barkpaw snapped.

Rosepettle lightly swatted him on the head. "Respect your elders, son. There'll be more."

And Rosepettle was right. Several more fish came there way until finally, Flamepaw managed to dig her claws into one. It was larger than the others, and she heaved it up with great strength. Flamepaw dropped it beside her and killed it, gasping as she glanced at its colored scales.

"Why, you've caught a salmon!" Rosepettle gasped. "They're my favorite."

"I-I've never caught one before," Flamepaw admitted.

"They're a bit harder to catch because of their size," Duskpelt explained, glancing at the fish. It was nearly Flamepaw's size, and it looked as if it would feed several cats well.

"Good job," Duskpelt purred. "That must take a lot of strength."

Flamepaw smiled and continued fishing while Barkpaw scowled and focused on the water, ignoring Rosepettle's soothing words of comfort. As more were caught, Barkpaw shrieked as he dug his paw into the water.

"I got it! I bet I got a salmon too!" he exclaimed, lifting the fish up. Unfortunately, his grasp hadn't been as tight, and it fell from his paw and began flopping on the forest floor.

"Yikes!" Barkpaw shrieked, rushing after his fish. He spun around Rosepettle and Flamepaw and dove for the fish, the slimy creature slipping through his paws and leaping back into the water.

"Fox-dung!" he spat in disappointment. Flamepaw couldn't help but giggle.

Despite Barkpaw's failed attempt, he had several more successful ones, as did Flamepaw. Soon, they had enough fish to feed the entire clan—well, in Flamepaw's eyes. Satisfied with the number of fish they'd caught, Duskpelt declared it time to go home.

Flamepaw happily grabbed a few fish, Barkpaw doing the same. Duskpelt and Rosepettle grabbed the remaining, and they were then heading back to RiverClan camp.

Flamepaw was pleased with her day of fishing and hoped Duskpelt was pleased too. She glanced up at him, hoping to see a reaction, but he only looked straight ahead.

Flamepaw turned back, her heart sinking. She followed Rosepettle and Barkpaw back into RiverClan camp, where they left their fish in the fresh-kill pile. The other RiverClan members were pleased with their donation, which allowed Flamepaw to feel joy.

As Flamepaw set down her last fish, Duskpelt at last turned to her.

"Good job for today. As a reward for your efforts, you don't have to get some more moss for No-Claw, even if he does complain," Duskpelt told her.

Flamepaw grinned. "Thanks. Did I do a good job?"

Duskpelt did not reply.

"Duskpelt?"

"What? Sorry," Duskpelt responded, clearly out of it. "Yes, you did a fabulous job."

"Is something wrong?" Flamepaw asked, wondering if perhaps he was too kind to tell her she had made some mistake.

"I'm thinking about what's been happening when we've been practicing fighting moves, Flamepaw. It's no secret that you were affected after the quest."

Flamepaw glanced down. She hadn't expected him to be so bothered by it.

"I'm not blaming you for anything. I just know you haven't been working to your best potential. I wasn't on the quest, and I don't know what you went through, but you clearly need to work things out. I'm not making you do anything, but I'm advising you to see Mothwing. She was on your quest and can help you overcome whatever fears you're facing. She's a great she-cat, Flamepaw, and I know she can help you."

Flamepaw did not reply but only glanced down at her white tipped paws.

"Flamepaw?" Duskpelt spoke, waiting for a reply.

"I-I'll think about it," Flamepaw decided, faking a smile as she left him. Noticing that her father was not in camp, she guessed he had not found enough time to walk in the forest with her. Sighing, Flamepaw padded off back to the apprentice den, Duskpelt's advice still in her mind.

Chapter 3

Upon waking up the following morning, Flamepaw was still reluctant to follow Duskpelt's advice. She knew it would be wise to talk to Mothwing, but her friend was so busy anyway training Spotpaw, it wasn't like she wanted to bother her.

Flamepaw opened her eyes to find the other apprentices sleeping soundly. Noticing it was just sunrise, she quietly crept out of the den, wondering if perhaps she should approach Mothwing. Only a few cats were up and about, mostly those joining on morning patrol.

Flamepaw's feet began to take her to Mothwing's den, despite her wish not to go there. Her heart pounding heavily, she thought back to the nightmare she'd had the previous night. She and Barkpaw had been happily playing in the forest when Korosu had appeared and slaughtered the tom...Flamepaw shuddered just thinking about it.

Peeking her head into the opening of the medicine cat den, she noticed Mothwing organizing herbs. From what Flamepaw could tell, it seemed Spotpaw was still sleeping, as the small she-cat did not appear beside her.

Letting out a deep breath, Mothwing turned in surprise, then relaxed as she noticed it was just Flamepaw.

"Ah, Flamepaw," Mothwing said, turning back to her herbs. "You scared me."

"S-Sorry," Flamepaw stammered, slowly padding into the medicine cat den. Before she could speak, she noticed Spotpaw on the other side of Mothwing. The brown she-cat was so small that Flamepaw's friend easily concealed her.

"Hi, Flamepaw!" Spotpaw squeaked. "Mothwing's showing me how to organize herbs!"

Mothwing giggled slightly. "Yes, that's right. We're just about to go out to fetch some more cobwebs. Was there something you needed, Flamepaw?"

Flamepaw immediately felt embarassed, not feeling comfortable enough to tell Mothwing her troubles in front of Spotpaw. Unfortunately, she hadn't come up with a good excuse as

to why she had appeared.

"Um...I think I may have gotten a thorn in my paw or something from yesterday," she lied, holding out her right paw.

"Can I look?" Spotpaw asked excitedly.

Mothwing nodded, then turned back to Flamepaw. "Spotpaw will inspect you while I finish organizing the herbs."

Flamepaw nodded. *Fox-dung,* she thought to herself, sitting down as Spotpaw instructed her to do so.

"Which paw is it?" Spotpaw wondered.

Stupidly, Flamepaw held out her left paw.

"Wasn't it your right?" Spotpaw asked.

"Yes, sorry," Flamepaw replied, holding out her paw. She watched as the medicine cat apprentice inspected it, and after a few moments of silence, she paused.

"There's nothing in the pad of your paws," she explained.

"I didn't think there was. It was hurting yesterday, so Duskpelt told me to see Mothwing, but I decided to wait. It must've come out. Thanks for your help," Flamepaw spoke quickly, exiting the den and leaving the confused Spotpaw behind.

Flamepaw rushed out of the den and immediately bumped into Barkpaw, who held a large robin in his jaws.

"Ah, watch it, Flamepaw!" he shouted, regaining his balance.

"Sorry," Flamepaw muttered, swiping dust off his pelt with her tail. She glanced at the robin at his feet. "Is that all for you?"

"I got it for us to share at breakfast," Barkpaw admitted.

Flamepaw's heart warmed at the tom's gesture. She had definitely grown towards him and enjoyed every moment being with him. Though recently, she felt another feeling growing inside her when he was around her.

"Thanks. Sorry about running into you," Flamepaw told him. She followed him to a spot right out in the sun and sat down.

"It's fine," Barkpaw admitted, taking a bite out of the robin. He chewed slowly, then swallowed.

"Why were you in Mothwing's den?" he wondered.

Flamepaw felt herself getting red with embarrassment. "I just wanted to visit her. She's my friend and all."

"Oh. I thought you'd gotten hurt," Barkpaw thought.

Flamepaw shook her head and took a bite of her robin before she could embarrass herself anymore. She and Barkpaw

talked quietly as they completed their breakfast. Suddenly, Flamepaw heard footsteps behind her and spun around to see Duskpelt.

"Ready to go, Flamepaw?" he wondered.

Flamepaw glanced back at Barkpaw, then turned back to her mentor. "Are Rosepettle and Barkpaw joining us?"

Duskpelt shook his head. "Not today. I thought we'd practice some more battle moves."

"Have fun, Flamepaw," Barkpaw called as Flamepaw rose nervously. She waved good-bye to her friend and trotted off with her mentor toward the RiverClan forest, unsure of how the day would go.

Each time Duskpelt opened his mouth to say something, Flamepaw winced, expecting the tom to ask her if she'd visited Mothwing, but the question never came. Slightly relaxed, Flamepaw followed him to the clearing in the forest where they'd practiced earlier.

"Here's good," Duskpelt admitted, stopping in the center of the grassy clearing. Flamepaw glanced around at the multi-colored trees of leaf-fall, the warm colors calming her slightly.

"What are we practicing?" Flamepaw asked, hoping Duskpelt couldn't see her legs shaking furiously. The last time she'd practiced fighting had been a disaster, and she wasn't too happy to try again.

"Let's try blocking," Duskpelt decided. "Blocking blows is important in battle. It can also help you defeat your opponent. Come forward, Flamepaw."

Flamepaw slowly padded forward.

"Try to swipe at me," he said.

Flamepaw swiped her paw at Duskpelt, only to be blocked by his strong paw.

"It's simple," he explained. "Though I suppose it becomes more difficult in the middle of a full-out battle. Blocking isn't just done with your paw though. It can be with your leg, your tail...whatever works to keep the opponent from hurting you. Now, I'm going to swipe my paw at you. Are you ready?"

Flamepaw gulped and nodded slowly, watching as Duskpelt's paw came. Weakly, she hit at it, but Duskpelt still managed to swipe her aside.

"Aw, come on. I know you can do this," Duskpelt

encouraged her.

Flamepaw took a deep breath and stood, firm, waiting for Duskpelt's paw to come again. As he swiped, she used her paw to push his aside.

"Good! Good!" Duskpelt exclaimed. "That was a good start. We'll have to keep practicing."

For a while longer, Flamepaw spent time with her mentor practicing blocking, though with each attempt, she felt herself losing more and more control of her actions. Perhaps her first block had just been lucky, as Duskpelt repeatedly kept swiping her.

"Let's try one more then call it a day," he decided.

Flamepaw nodded, knowing she couldn't miss this one. As his paw came however, his black fur turned white, and his sheathed claws were replaced by silver unsheathed ones. Flamepaw yowled and jumped aside.

"Well, that was a good dodge, but it wasn't blocking," Duskpelt admitted as he placed his paw down. Flamepaw blinked, seeing his paw was still black and his claws sheathed.

"Let's head back," Duskpelt decided.

"But I didn't block you," Flamepaw admitted, disappointed.

"That's okay. There'll be more time to practice later," he said.

Flamepaw's heart sunk, and she followed her mentor out of the woods. Why couldn't she just forget about Korosu? If this kept up, she'd never be a warrior!

As Duskpelt led her out of the forest, he turned to her and spoke quietly.

"You didn't speak to Mothwing, did you?"

Flamepaw glanced down at her paws and didn't reply.

"Please, Flamepaw, I insist. I think it'll help you. I know, and I think you know, too, that this is severely affecting your training. I don't want to see you become a warrior late because of this. You have so much potential. I know what you're capable of," he explained.

Flamepaw sighed and glanced back up into the tom's yellow eyes.

"I-I'll talk to her," she decided, knowing she couldn't let Duskpelt down. He was her mentor, after all.

"Good," Duskpelt said as they entered camp. He patted her back with his tail and smiled warmly. "I'm hoping you'll be

mastering those battle moves in no time."

Flamepaw smiled weakly, grateful for the tom's support. She then padded once again to Mothwing's den. One warrior was inside getting his paw inspected by Spotpaw while Mothwing grabbed the apprentice some herbs.

Flamepaw waited patiently near the entrance of the den until the two had finished up.

"You're good to go," Mothwing told the warrior. He grinned, thankful for their help, and exited.

"Back again, Flamepaw?" Mothwing asked as she turned around and placed herbs away.

"Did you actually get a thorn in your paw this time?" Spotpaw wondered.

"Actually, I was wondering if I could talk to you, Mothwing," Flamepaw spoke. She glanced at Spotpaw, then added, "Privately."

Mothwing's eyes widened, and she nodded. "Spotpaw, we're almost out of marigold. Why don't you grab some more?"

"Okay!" Spotpaw agreed, happily skipping out of the den. Once she was gone, the calico she-cat turned to her friend in concern. "Is something wrong?" she wondered.

Flamepaw didn't know why, but tears gathered in her eyes.

"Ever since the journey...I've been having visions, dreams about Korosu. She scares me, Mothwing, and I know it's because I'm scared of her! And normally it wouldn't matter, but it's been affecting my training with Duskpelt, and I just want her gone!" she sobbed.

Mothwing sat, her face in a frown. She rubbed her tail along Flamepaw's back as she cried, hushing her calmly.

"There, there, let it out," she spoke.

Once Flamepaw was able to get all the tears out, she calmed down and waited for Mothwing to speak.

"I understand. We've been through a lot, Flamepaw. I never got too close to Korosu, but I know what she's capable of. Remember I was with the foxes too and captured by them. That scared me, and I remember having dreams for a little bit and being scared of foxes coming after me. What you faced is much worse, but we have to be strong," Mothwing explained.

"But how do I make them stop?"

"You only let yourself make these dreams come," Mothwing

told her. "You are convincing yourself of something that won't happen. It's okay to be afraid, but you can't let your fears control you. Flamepaw, RiverClan is a strong clan. Korosu has not stepped near our border since Goldstar's return, thanks to you. I assure you that you're safe."

Flamepaw nodded, but was still not eased.

"I know this is hard for you to believe. What I can tell you though is that we all must face our fears. It is a process we all must go through when becoming a warrior. I am not a warrior myself, so I won't go through this process as vigorously as you will, but you must take your fears and use them as energy to fuel you. Just think, if you master those battle moves, you won't be frightened of Korosu."

Flamepaw's heart lifted, and she suddenly felt a bit better. "Really?"

Mothwing nodded. "It's important to focus on the positives too. Think of your family, Barkpaw, your friends. That should help the dreams cease. Try to replace your fears with happy memories and thoughts."

"Thank you, Mothwing," Flamepaw said, dipping her head.

Mothwing smiled. "I'm glad I could help. Come to me if you need any more help. I might be able to get a sleeping aid for you."

"Thanks, but I don't think I need it," Flamepaw admitted, walking toward the entrance of the den.

"Then I'm glad," Mothwing replied, grinning.

Flamepaw smiled and exited the den with new confidence. She wouldn't let Korosu control her anymore.

Chapter 4

Flamepaw happily trotted along in the RiverClan forest beside Barkpaw. Up ahead were Duskpelt and Rosepettle, both of whom led the way through the colorful woods. Flamepaw glanced around excitedly, for the first time not feeling a sense of fear.

Since her discussion with Mothwing, Flamepaw felt a lot safer and secure. Her dreams had casually faded into nothingness, instead being replaced with dreams of becoming a warrior or better yet, leader of RiverClan.

Flamepaw was glad these visions were no longer haunting her, and she knew that even though Korosu was out there, she'd be ready to take her is time. With the nightmares gone, she'd been able to easily adjust back to training with Duskpelt and found her battle moves steadily improving. She guessed she'd be a warrior in no time!

Today, Duskpelt and Rosepettle had decided on practicing some battle moves together with the two apprentices. The entire way to their destination, Flamepaw had been teasing Barkpaw about how she'd be able to take him easily during the training, to which Barkpaw replied he'd also been improving in his training.

"We're here," Duskpelt said at last, stepping into the clearing of the forest. Flamepaw bounced with excitement and leapt to her mentor's side while Barkpaw went and stood by Rosepettle.

"What's the plan?" Barkpaw asked his mentor.

"You two will be demonstrating what you've learned so far in battle training," Duskpelt explained, his voice booming through the clearing. "Both of you have come far in your training, and both Rosepettle and I thought it'd be a good idea for you to demonstrate what you've learned to each other. However, this is a safe battle, so claws sheathed and no biting. I don't want to see a speck of blood, understand?"

Both Flamepaw and Barkpaw nodded, clearly aware of the rules of their fight.

"When you're ready, you may begin," Rosepettle declared.

Flamepaw nodded, facing her opponent. Barkpaw stood, his chest puffed out wide. He apparently seemed pretty confident he'd win this fight. Before he could move, however, Flamepaw shot at him and knocked him over.

Barkpaw yowled, shouting, "I wasn't ready! Start over!"

"There is no starting over in battle," Rosepettle teased as Flamepaw held Barkpaw down.

Barkpaw growled and with his muscular limbs, knocked Flamepaw over. Flamepaw immediately stood up, dodging the tom as he lunged at her. Flamepaw leapt over the tom and landed on the opposite side of him, beginning to circling him. Barkpaw leapt again, this time hitting Flamepaw with accuracy.

Flamepaw yelped as she felt the impact of Barkpaw against her. In an instant, he had her pinned down. Fortunately, Flamepaw was prepared for this moment, and so she clawed at his belly with her paws. Barkpaw giggled and released her, allowing Flamepaw to pin him once again and stand over him in triumph.

"All right, that's enough!" Duskpelt called, ending the fight.

"Flamepaw wins!" Rosepettle declared.

Barkpaw grumbled to himself as he rose to his feet and wiped the dirt from his pelt. Despite his loss, he still turned to Flamepaw, saying, "Good job."

"You did well too," Flamepaw told Barkpaw.

"Both of you did well," Duskpelt explained. "And both of you still need work. But for now, let's return back to the clan."

Agreeing to this, the four began to make their way out of the forest as the sun began to set behind them. Flamepaw's stomach growled,

and she longed for a tasty fish to munch on upon her return.

"Are you as hungry as I am?" Flamepaw asked Barkpaw.

"Starving," Barkpaw replied in exasperation.

"Why don't we share a piece of prey when we get back?" Flamepaw suggested to her friend.

"Sure," he agreed, causing Flamepaw's heart to warm.

"And," he added in a lower tone, "I have an idea for something we could do this evening."

"What's that?" Flamepaw wondered.

Seeming kind of embarrassed, Barkpaw spoke quietly, "How about a moonlight stroll?"

Flamepaw's heart leapt at the idea, and she desperately wanted to go, but an idea stuck in the back of her mind. "But only evening patrol is out by that time."

"It'll just be a short walk. What do you say?" Barkpaw asked, seeming kind of dejected by her rejection.

"Well," Flamepaw signed. "Okay."

"Great!" Barkpaw exclaimed, his green eyes lighting up with her agreement.

Upon returning to the clan, Flamepaw found a fish in the fresh-kill pile and brought it to Barkpaw where they both began to dig into their meal. After a long day practicing hunting and fighting, it was nice to gain some of that energy back.

"Hey, you really did do a good job today," Flamepaw told Barkpaw.

Barkpaw frowned. "I guess."

"Hey, you're really strong, which will help you in battle. Me? I'm not strong, but I'm fast. We just have different strengths and

weaknesses," Flamepaw admitted, not wanting to see the tom looking so down.

Barkpaw nodded, though he still seemed upset. The last rays of the sun were disappearing at this point, trapping the forest in a sea of darkness. The half-full moon shown up above, allowing some light to spread across the forest.

Picking at the bones of her fish, Flamepaw glanced eagerly at the forest, anxiously awaiting her moonlight stroll with Barkpaw. Her heart leapt at the idea, surprising her. She'd felt herself growing more and more flabbergasted and embarrassed when Barkpaw was around. She knew she shouldn't, as he was her friend, yet she couldn't help but think her feelings were growing toward him, and the same went from him to her.

"Ready to go?" Barkpaw asked, noticing nothing but bones remained of their meal.

Flamepaw nodded, and quietly, they snuck out of camp while the others were chatting with each other or heading to bed. Flamepaw excitedly padded through the woods with Barkpaw, admiring the view as they padded through the moonlit woods.

"Pretty night," Barkpaw observed as he glanced around. Flamepaw nodded, feeling awkward as a silence fell on them. Despite her wish to continue the walk until dawn, she already noticed how tired she felt. Still, she didn't want to spoil the fun, and so she continued walking.

Coming up by the river's edge, Barkpaw poked her, shouting, "Tag!"

Despite her exhaustion, there was no way Flamepaw could turn down a game of tag. It reminded her of being a kit in the nursery oh so many moons ago. It seemed like an eternity compared to now.

Flamepaw chased after the tom through the moonlit forest, shouting as she approached him. With her quick legs, she easily caught up to him and poked him with her paw, shouting, "Tag!"

"Oh, no you don't!" Barkpaw shouted, beginning to chase her

around the RiverClan forest. Flamepaw shrieked in surprise and ran as fast as her legs could keep up with her. Barkpaw followed behind, yowling and laughing.

Flamepaw laughed too, gasping as she felt Barkpaw's tail swipe her.

"Tag," he spoke, smirking at her.

Flamepaw turned and chased after him, finding her pace quickly slowing down. It took her longer to tag Barkpaw this time, and even longer for him to tag her. Their shouts, screams, and laugher soon died down into panting and catching breath.

Eventually, Flamepaw came to a halt and collapsed in a patch of grass. Barkpaw did the same and collapsed on the left side of her, panting heavily. Flamepaw could feel her heart beating heavily in her chest.

"Give up?" Barkpaw asked.

"All right, you are the champion of tag," she admitted, her heart beat slowly dying down.

"Yes!" Barkpaw exclaimed. "One thing I'm good at!"

Flamepaw giggled, not wanting to move. "Mind if we just lay here a little bit?" she asked. "I'm exhausted."

"Sure," Barkpaw replied. "I don't want to head back to camp just yet either."

Flamepaw nodded, listening to the sound of the forest at night as the moon and stars shone above their heads. She felt her eyes getting droopy but forced them open.

"Hey, is everything okay?" Barkpaw asked at one point.

"What do you mean?" Flamepaw wondered.

"Duskpelt seemed worried about you, and I saw you talking to Mothwing. Are-are you still having nightmares?" Barkpaw asked, clearly embarrassed to be asking. "I mean, I know it's personal, but

you're my closest friend, and...I care about you, and I just wanted to know..."

"I was," Flamepaw admitted. "But Duskpelt told me to talk to Mothwing to get help, and so I agreed. I'm fine now, honest."

"Okay, just making sure," Barkpaw spoke.

"But thank you for asking," Flamepaw replied. "I really do appreciate it."

Barkpaw nodded, and Flamepaw, completely exhausted, let out a large yawn, followed by Barkpaw doing the same. She was about to suggest heading back when her eyelids drooped and she found herself falling asleep curled up next to Barkpaw in the moonlit RiverClan forest.

Flamepaw awoke, startled, the following morning. Her eyes opened slowly, and where she expected to see herself in the RiverClan apprentice den, she found herself still curled up next to the sleeping Barkpaw in the forest.

"Barkpaw!" Flamepaw hissed, shoving the tom. His eyes slowly opened, and it seemed he was filled with the same shock Flamepaw had been filled with.

"Guess we must've accidentally fallen asleep," Barkpaw admitted.

Flamepaw immediately began to fill with worry. "Do you have idea how much trouble we'll be in? Morning patrol's probably already left, and we're probably already late for training! Oh, I knew this was a bad idea!"

"Settle down," Barkpaw spoke, attempting to calm her. "We just accidentally fell asleep, that's all."

"But we weren't even supposed to be out late!" Flamepaw exclaimed, upset.

"Let's head back to the clan. Maybe they haven't even noticed," Barkpaw suggested. Flamepaw nodded, though she doubted this. Worry began to circle her brain. What if she never became a

warrior now? What if she was exiled? She couldn't be exiled for being late, could she?

Each step to the clan made Flamepaw become even more nervous, and her heart raced as she noticed the clan up ahead. Something seemed odd though...different. The normal scents she smelled seemed stale, and she swore she saw no movement.

Barkpaw also seemed to have noticed this oddity, as he approached the clan more quickly. Flamepaw followed behind and stumbled into camp, finding it completely empty with the exception of the fresh-kill pile.

"Where is everyone?" Flamepaw asked. Was this a punishment? Since they were later the clan decided to trick them into thinking they were gone? No, that seemed silly.

"I'll check the dens," Barkpaw suggested.

"Hey, anyone here?!" Flamepaw called, her voice echoing through the hair. She sniffed the air but found the scent of her clanmates to be incredibly stale. It seemed as if they hadn't been here in hours...

Barkpaw rushed back to her, panting. "All the dens are empty, and the nests are cold. I'm not sure most of them were even slept in."

Flamepaw gasped, her heart pounding. RiverClan was gone, empty, with no sign of its members left. What had happened that had made them all go?

Chapter 5

Both Flamepaw and Barkpaw stood in the center of the RiverClan camp, completely dumbstruck and terrified. The entire clan was empty with not a single trace of any cat left behind. The reality had not yet sunk in to Flamepaw, and her mind could only question where the clan had gone and when they'd return.

Perhaps they were all searching for us, Flamepaw wondered. Or maybe there was a large patrol sent out because one of the other clans was getting a bit too close to the border.

But it was useless. Flamepaw knew the disappearance of the clan could not be the result of a good thing. It wasn't as if the leaving of the clan had been planned. She and Barkpaw had no knowledge of this disappearance, and Flamepaw suspected that if they had been asleep in their nests at night, they too would be gone.

While this thought was somewhat relieving to Flamepaw, her heart was shattered at the thought of perhaps never seeing her clanmates again.

Flamepaw let out a startled cry and fell to the ground. Barkpaw immediately turned to her and stood by her side as she let out yelps and tears. He stood beside her and did not speak at all, only running his tail up and down her back as she sobbed.

It wasn't fair. She'd been gone for moons searching for her leader. And when she'd returned, she'd been overcome with nightmares. But now that they were finally gone, now that she finally been happy and excited to be an apprentice in RiverClan, her friends, family, acquaintances, had all disappeared without a trace.

Barkpaw seemed to understand this with his silence, as his eyes gazed into Flamepaw's with empathy. He too had lost his family and clan. Therefore Flamepaw guessed he felt less pain going through an experience like this before.

But this was an entirely new experience for Flamepaw. She had lost everyone in but a mere night and had no idea where her clan was. Would she ever find them again? Would she ever be reunited with them? What if she never became a warrior?

She sighed, her tears beginning to cease as she faced reality. Thinking about a warrior was a foolish thought at the moment. For now, she had to focus on finding her clan. She glanced up at Barkpaw, glad that she was not facing this alone. She couldn't imagine taking on this task all by herself.

"Feeling better?" Barkpaw asked softly.

Flamepaw nodded and sat back up, still sniffing occasionally.

"How about some breakfast?" Barkpaw suggested. "Then we'll talk."

Flamepaw wasn't in the least bit hungry, but she found herself nodding. She remained in the same position, watching as Barkpaw retrieved a fish from the still-full fresh-kill pile. With the fresh-kill pile still being full, Flamepaw burst with hope, wondering if it was left that way because the clan would return.

Barkpaw trotted back and dropped the fish in front of her. They remained silent as they ate, Flamepaw only nibbling at the fish while Barkpaw gobbled the rest down. When the thin white bones of the fish remained, Barkpaw opened his mouth to speak. Before he could let a word fly through his mouth, however, Flamepaw interrupted him.

"What are we going to do?!" she exclaimed, feeling the tears and hysterics returning.

"Well, first, remain calm," Barkpaw ordered, which hushed Flamepaw up.

"We have to find them," Flamepaw muttered.

"They may not necessarily be missing," Barkpaw pointed out.

"What do you mean?! The entire clan isn't here! Of course they're missing!" she hissed in rage.

"I'm not suggesting they just decided to leave, but if they are in danger, keep in mind the clan is strong. RiverClan is much stronger than my old clan, and I have faith that the clan can come together and return home no matter what they're facing. If we were just to throw ourselves after them, we may be put in a dangerous situation with them."

"What are you suggesting?" Flamepaw asked, suspicious.

"I'm saying we wait this out for a little bit," Barkpaw began.

Flamepaw opened her mouth to argue, but Barkpaw kept talking.

"Before you start snapping at me, just hear me out. We'll stay seven sunrises at least. If we've heard nothing or the clan hasn't returned, we'll go searching," Barkpaw explained.

"But they could be in an entirely different forest by that point!" Flamepaw exclaimed.

"Maybe, or maybe not. They could also be returning," he explained. "Please, Flamepaw, just hear me out. I've gone through this before, and I know it's hard, but I didn't return to my clan because I knew there would be nothing left. But this time I have faith. We will find RiverClan, but it's going to take some patience."

Though Flamepaw appeared to act annoyed and irritated at Barkpaw, she was grateful for his advice and knew it was the correct thing to do.

"It's just hard," she muttered. "My parents are gone, my friends, my mentor. What about training, Barkpaw? What will we do?"

"Training is the least of our worries right now, and I think you know that too," Barkpaw replied. "What happens if we fall behind? The whole clan will probably fall behind. Right now we just need to focus on the clan's return."

"Dusktail won't be happy," Flamepaw sighed.

"Neither will Rosepettle but you don't see me complaining. No more waking up right as the sun comes up," Barkpaw pointed out, which

made Flamepaw laugh a little. It felt good thinking of their clanmates and old rituals. But at the same time, she still felt a shadow of gloom pass over her reminiscing. When would Dusktail get to lecture her again? When was the next time she'd be woken up by Barkpaw at the crack of dawn for training?

"I'm glad you're here with me," Flamepaw admitted.

Barkpaw smiled weakly. "I'm glad you're here too. I had no one after I left LightningClan. Well, until I found all of you guys, I guess. Let me tell you, being alone and traveling through s forest is a horrifying experience."

"How long were you gone when we found you?" Flamepaw wondered, trying to keep her mind off the clan by asking about Barkpaw's past.

"About a moon. Not that long, but still enough to frighten me," Barkpaw admitted.

Flamepaw nodded, glancing at the abandoned dens. Though she truly was listening to Barkpaw, her mind had returned to the clan, and she wondered when the nests sitting in the dens would ever be slept in again.

"Hey, back here," Barkpaw called, calling her attention over to him. "Don't look at the dens right now. Let's just sit here a little while."

Flamepaw nodded, thinking of laying close to Barkpaw the night before. Her heart leapt at the idea, but the butterfly-like emotion was quickly dismissed as she returned her nervous thoughts back to her clan.

A sudden rustle of bushes on the outskirts of the camp made both Flamepaw and Barkpaw jump. Flamepaw remained frozen while Barkpaw stood up. He glanced around, and Flamepaw sniffed the air, but she could detect not unknown odor.

"Probably just a squirrel," Barkpaw admitted, sitting back down slowly. As he did so, the noise came again, and he shot back up.

Unsheathing her claws, Barkpaw did the same, growling, "Who's

there?"

When no response came, Barkpaw hissed louder, "We know you're the rest!"

"What if it's a RiverClan member?" Flamepaw asked quietly, not wanting him to scare any possible clanmates away, but Barkpaw merely ignored her.

As if on cue, a calico she-cat tumbled out of the bushes, her claws unsheathed. She snarled, then sheathed her claws as she recognized Barkpaw and Flamepaw.

"Troutfin!" Flamepaw gasped, recognizing the RiverClan deputy. Relief flooded over her until Troutfin's eyes grew wide with worry, and she sat down to think.

"Troutfin, where is everyone?" Barkpaw wondered.

"What happened?" Flamepaw wondered.

Troutfin glanced at the ground and at her paws, remaining completely still. Flamepaw glanced at her with curiosity and approached the calico.

"What are you doing?" she wondered.

"Th-thinking," Troutfin stammered, raising her eyes only a second to look at Flamepaw and then glanced back down.

Flamepaw frowned, knowing something wasn't right with the deputy. Since she'd been named deputy she had always presented herself as a strong and intelligent she-cat, but it seemed something was bothering her immensely.

"Where's the clan, Troutfin? Where should we go?" Barkpaw wondered. It seemed as if he was in a hurry to quit his plan now that he'd found a RiverClan warrior.

Troutfin pricked her ears and glanced around nervously. "Flamepaw, Barkpaw...I have to leave. Leave somewhere away from here."

"What?! Barkpaw exclaimed.

"You can't! You're RiverClan deputy! The whole clan is missing and now we finally found another warrior! You can't just abandon the clan!"

"I-I can't tell you," Troutfin muttered.

"Tell us what?" Barkpaw growled. "You're nothing but a coward, turning away when the clan needs you the most."

"Troutfin, where is the clan?" Flamepaw asked again more calmly.

Unfortunately, her question was overshadowed by Barkpaw's.

"I am not a coward!" Troutfin hissed, her tail fluffing up with the familiar temper she once possessed.

"What was that?" Barkpaw asked.

"Troutfin, where is the clan?" Flamepaw repeated.

"No, you don't understand. I must go," Troutfin announced, rising to her feet.

"No, you can't!" Flamepaw begged.

Troutfin glanced at her one last time, her eyes full of sympathy. And with that glance, she zipped off, disappearing almost as fast as she had come.

"Coward!" Barkpaw called, though it seemed Troutfin was too far gone to hear it.

"What was that about?" Flamepaw wondered. "Do you think she was with the clan?"

Barkpaw shrugged. "All I know is that something is not right with that she-cat."

"So we stick with our original plan?" Flamepaw asked, her heart sinking with disappointment. They'd been so close.

Barkpaw nodded sadly. "We stay here for a while, look around the forest, hope the clan returns."

Flamepaw nodded, though nervousness spread throughout her. Though she'd been concerned before, Troutfin's wild and odd appearance had made her even more concerned.

Chapter 6

Flamepaw awoke to feel Barkpaw poking at her side. Slowly, she opened her eyes, finding light peeking into the nearly empty apprentice den. She laughed to herself, finding it funny how despite the entire camp was deserted, she and Barkpaw were still adamant to sleep in their nests in the apprentice den.

It had been a few days since their wild encounter with Troutfin, and now, she and Barkpaw were desperately praying to StarClan that the clan would return. The daily routine was simple. They'd eat breakfast and stick around for a bit. Then, they'd head out into the forest looking for any signs or clues. This process of searching and staying was repeated until night fell, and then the cycle repeated again in the morning.

Flamepaw was beginning to get more nervous, however, as the seven sunrises were quickly approaching. If the clan had not returned by that time, it would be up to her and Barkpaw to search for the clan members. And while she knew it could be done, she was unsure how two mere apprentices were going to save their clan from whatever was happening to them. At least when she'd gone to find Goldstar she'd had plenty of other cats with her.

"Wake up," Barkpaw told her. "Maybe they'll be back today."

He said this every day, and Flamepaw knew it was his attempt to lift her spirits, but she couldn't help but feel more disappointed each day he said this. Still, she was glad to have Barkpaw's company, and she truly regarded him as much more than a friend at this point. She wondered if he thought the same.

Rising to her feet, Flamepaw reluctantly followed Barkpaw outside to see the sun rising above the forest. She shivered a bit, the air cold with the fast-approaching leaf-bare, but still, she was happy to see the sun rise. It was one of the few pleasures she got from being here alone, knowing that while they may have failed in assisting the clan the day before, a new day was upon them and the possibilities of that day were endless.

"Last robin," Barkpaw explained, plucking one of the few non-fish pieces of prey from the pile. All of the fish had been eaten by them at this point, and the pile was becoming increasingly low.

It didn't bother them too much though. If the clan did not return, then they'd be out of here quickly and would not have to bother restocking it.

Unless they return after we leave, Flamepaw thought, trying to block these negative thoughts from her mind. No, she had to think positive. If they hadn't returned by that point, odds were they would need help returning.

Flamepaw bit into her share of the robin, missing the salty taste of fish. She could easily go catch some with Barkpaw, but he had suggested instead eating from the kill pile, not wanting to waste the prey that so many cats had spent countless hours hunting. Flamepaw agreed, but she still longed for some trout or even a taste of salmon.

"Pick up any scents?" Flamepaw asked.

Barkpaw shook his head as he chewed his breakfast. "Not last time I checked. A squirrel, but that's about it. Even Troutfin's scent has completely vanished by now."

Flamepaw's stomach became uenasy at the thought of Troutfin. How could such a collected and organized deputy have fallen apart so quickly? What had caused her emotional distress?

"I know you're upset about Troutfin," Barkpaw spoke, as if he had read her mind. "But obviously she couldn't help us. And she was a coward to leave us and the clan."

"I just wish we could find them," Flamepaw muttered miserably. She wanted to see all of her close clanmates again.

"Do you think Korosu is behind this?" she asked after a moment of silence.

"It wouldn't surprise me," Barkpaw admitted. "For moons we go without hearing about that she-cat and now the clan suddenly goes missing."

"Why have none of the other clans checked on us yet?" Flamepaw wondered.

None of the other three clans had attempted to check on RiverClan, probably assuming the whole clan had vanished by this point. Still, their land had not been invaded, and the borders had still been kept. Flamepaw had suggested visiting one of the other clans, but Barkpaw had been against it, not knowing if they too were perhaps a part of the plan.

So while Flamepaw desperately wanted to go searching for answers, she was forced to stay in her deserted camp and wait.

And after breakfast, that's precisely what she and Barkpaw did. They paced around camp (well, Flamepaw mostly) wondering when their clan or if their clan would ever return. While Barkpaw sniffed the air for any scents, Flamepaw wandered in and out of dens, memories flooding back to her.

She stepped into the medicine cat den, finding all of Mothwing's herbs organized just as she had left them. Her heart swelled thinking of her dear friend Mothwing who'd helped her overcome her fears. Flamepaw had to repay her by assisting her and the clan.

Sighing, Flamepaw exited the medicine cat den and wandered into the leader's den where one lone nest sat near the corner. As much as Flamepaw missed her friends and family, she supposed she missed Goldstar the most. The two had never been that close, but when they spoke, they truly connected. She missed the leader's authority and management of the clan.

Flamepaw approached Goldstar's nest, still able to catch a whiff of the she-cat's scent. It was stale, of course, nearly gone. For some unknown reason, Flamepaw crawled into Goldstar's nest, finding it incredibly comfy. She closed her eyes, imagining Goldstar sitting here, conducting the clan.

Tears began to swell in Flamepaw's eyes, and she desperately longed for her leader. She wondered if Goldstar had felt this way when Gingerkit had died, stuck in a lonely world with nothing to do. The situations were completely different, of course. Gingerkit was assured dead while Flamepaw had no idea whether any of her clanmates were alive. Flamepaw supposed her situation was a bit worse. Not knowing was torture.

Flamepaw had hoped Gingerkit or some other StarClan cat would come to her with some message, some sign that the clan was safe and okay, but nothing had come. The nightmares had not returned either, and so when Flamepaw slept, she slept in a world of darkness with no vivid dreams or nightmares. It was torture.

Hearing footsteps, Flamepaw gazed up, watching as Barkpaw stepped inside. As soon as he caught sight of the crying Flamepaw, he sighed.

"Why don't we go look in the forest now?" he suggested, ushering her out of the leader's den with no other words besides that.

Flamepaw didn't know how she'd be able to get through this

without Barkpaw. He'd been so supportive, so helpful during this difficult time. She nuzzled him sweetly, watching as his face lit up just a little. It was not meant to be romantic though, just a simple appreciative act. But did she want it to be romantic?

Flamepaw shook her head, not wanting to be thrown into her questionable relationship with Barkpaw at the time. There would be time for that later, when the clan was found, or they had an idea about where the clan was. For now, she had to focus on finding her clanmates.

Glad to be exiting the deserted camp, Flamepaw followed Barkpaw into the familiar forest. As they walked through, desperately sniffing the air, every tree, every blade of grass for some scent of clanmates, she found the forest to be much quieter and emptier than it had been when the clan was there.

There were no patrols going by, no cats hunting, no training sessions going on. The only sound came from the wind and the dead leaves that rolled across the forest floor. A bit of chilly wind swept against Flamepaw, and she shivered, continuing to walk.

She glanced over at Barkpaw, though he didn't seem to be too phased by the chilly weather. He led her near the river where they once again found no scent whatsoever of their former clan members. As Barkpaw sniffed around, Flamepaw glanced into the rushing water, imagining herself back at the river's edge with Dusktail and catching fish with him. She imagined Barkpaw and Rosepettle beside her, supporting her as she caught fish.

"No fishing," Barkpaw reminded her.

"I know," Flamepaw replied glumly. "I was just thinking."

"About what?" Barkpaw asked, sitting down beside her.

"Of that day when I caught the salmon. Everyone was so proud of me. I wish I were back sitting here with Dusktail. I wish I were back with him on the first day he taught me to fish," Flamepaw explained, thinking all the way back to before she had even gone on her quest. Barkpaw had not even been a RiverClan member at the time.

Barkpaw nodded slowly.

"Do you miss Rosepettle?" she asked.

"I don't miss training so much," Barkpaw replied jokingly, which caused a slight laugh to erupt from Flamepaw, though it was minimal and barely audible.

"But, yes, I miss her," Barkpaw explained. "And I know you

miss Dusktail. Just think, if we investigate and find out about the clan, maybe we'll be made warriors on the spot!"

Flamepaw nodded, though becoming a warrior had not even entered her mind that often since the clan's mysterious disappearance. At first she'd been frightened about getting behind in her training, but she realized the fate of her clan was much more important than becoming a warrior. After all, the quest had helped her a lot with her training, and she was sure this would too. For a moment, she was in her own imagination, thinking of her and Barkpaw standing with Goldstar as she gave them their warrior names. What a day that would be...if it ever came.

"Maybe we should head back," Flamepaw suggested.

"Let's go about one more time," Barkpaw proposed instead.

Flamepaw could not argue, and so, for a second time they went around and found themselves disappointed. At this time, they returned to camp where Barkpaw went inside for a nap while Flamepaw sat outside in the sunlight, rolling a moss ball back and forth between her paws.

As she glanced into the blue skies, Flamepaw could imagine herself looking up at StarClan, and she whispered quietly, "Please bring my clan home."

Chapter 7

"Flamepaw, Flamepaw," came a familiar voice.

Flamepaw glanced up, recognizing the familiar calm tone of her mother. And there, right in front of her, stood her mother, with her gleaming golden pelt. Her father, Brownpelt, stood right beside her, grinning.

"Mom! Dad!" Flamepaw shouted, running to her parents. Her mother embraced her warmly by wrapping her tail around Flamepaw, but the sensation felt different somehow.

"What's happening? Where have you gone? Are you hurt?"

"We've been here the whole time," Brownpelt explained.

"We've all been here," her mother added.

Flamepaw watched as suddenly the entirety of RiverClan came into view. There was Goldstar and Troutfin, Rosepettle and Spotteddusk, and even Mothwing with her little apprentice, Spotpaw.

Why did I think they were missing? Flamepaw wondered. *They're all here, right in front of me. Everyone is safe.*

And with those thoughts, she watched as the cats began to fade, and she was shaken awake by Barkpaw.

Flamepaw gasped in surprise, watching as the cats were replaced by the empty apprentice den. Barkpaw stood alongside her, concerned.

"Are you okay?" he wondered, rays of the morning sun gleaming off his pelt. "You were muttering in your sleep."

It had all been a dream.

"I-I'm fine," Flamepaw stammered, still trying to get over the shock. She had felt so close to all her clan members, she had been assured they were all safe and standing near her. And then, in a moment, they were gone, just like when she and Barkpaw had returned to find the clan gone.

"Bad dreams?" Barkpaw asked.

"No, I was just..." Flamepaw's voice trailed off, and she glanced past him, refusing to make eye contact with him. Her eyes instead focused on the fresh-kill pile outside the den that was growing smaller and smaller by the day. Her stomach rumbled, and

she supposed breakfast would be the best option.

"Hungry?" Barkpaw asked.

Flamepaw nodded, and together, they exited the apprentice den.

It was their sixth sunrise, marking only two full days left before they'd set out on their own to uncover the mystery surrounding RiverClan's disappearance. While Flamepaw was somewhat relieved to finally be able to leave the camp, she was also nervous, wishing RiverClan would just appear so they wouldn't have to take such extreme measures.

"How about a rabbit?" Barkpaw wondered.

Flamepaw let out a small groan but nodded. The fish had run out long ago, and while they could still fish on their own, they still wanted to make use of the fresh-kill pile before all the prey went bad.

Barkpaw brought the rabbit over to Flamepaw, and together, they bit into it, enjoying their meal in silence. Barkpaw had been keeping his distance some from Flamepaw, not because he was frightened of her or upset with her, but because he understood the pain Flamepaw was going through and was trying to give Flamepaw space. And though Flamepaw enjoyed this, she didn't like feeling too distant from Barkpaw. She wanted them to be close to each other, especially if they were to be traveling together in a matter of days.

"Not bad," Barkpaw remarked as he continued to eat his rabbit.

Flamepaw nodded, glancing up at him.

"Thank you," was all she said.

"For what?" Barkpaw wondered, suddenly confused.

"For all of this," Flamepaw confessed. "You've been so calm and collected this entire time, coming up with ideas and thinking of clever ways we can survive. Meanwhile I've been sulking and sobbing. I-I wouldn't be anywhere without you. Thank you for being such a good...friend," she said.

Barkpaw smiled. "Flamepaw," he said quietly, approaching her. "You have been a great help since this happened."

Flamepaw smiled weakly, though tears were gathering in her eyes. She felt a sense of comfort as Barkpaw wrapped his tail around her. A strong feeling emerged inside her, and she buried her head into his warm chest.

"I know this is a lot to go through. I wasn't with you at the beginning of your original quest for Goldstar. But I promise we'll get through this together, both of us, and RiverClan will be saved. Don't think you've been making me upset or slowing us down. What you're going through is completely normal. I experienced it with my clan," Barkpaw explained.

"Really?" Flamepaw wondered, her throat scratchy from holding back tears.

Barkpaw nodded and nuzzled her, causing butterflies to erupt in Flamepaw's stomach. She loved Barkpaw she realized now. He was more to her than a friend, but possibly a soulmate, someone who would always be there for her. But she couldn't tell him right now. Not with everything that was going on...

"Barkpaw, I..." Flamepaw began, then stopped.

"What is it?" he asked, pulling away from her.

Did he feel the same way that she did? Should she confess this new feeling? Perhaps she was just overreacting.

"Why don't we patrol the border now," she suggested.

"Good idea," Barkpaw replied.

And then the moment quickly ended. The remains of the rabbit were left behind, and Flamepaw instead followed Barkpaw out of the barren RiverClan camp into the forest. She knew these patrols were seemingly useless now, as they'd gone on several and had still managed to find no trace of RiverClan scent. Still, Barkpaw suggested they keep it up, and Flamepaw couldn't argue. Maybe they would run into some new scent someday. After all, Troutfin had appeared briefly, hadn't she?

Together, Flamepaw trotted with Barkpaw through the woods, chatting quietly with him. It felt nice to have a pleasant conversation going, even if it was sort of meaningless. They were discussing their favorite types of fish to eat, and while the discussion made Flamepaw hungry for fish, it kept her mind off the whole RiverClan ordeal.

Both Flamepaw and Barkpaw kept their noses lifted as they scoured the territory, following their familiar route. A faint breeze scattered across the forest, chilling Flamepaw. She almost missed those unbearably warm green-leaf days.

"Anything?" Flamepaw asked as she watched Barkpaw sniff the air.

He sighed, answering the question for her.

"I should've known anyway," she murmured.

"I'm sorry, Flamepaw," Barkpaw confessed.

Flamepaw shook her head. "It's okay. We'll be leaving in a few days, won't we?"

"Let's not think about that right now," Barkpaw told her. "Maybe we'll have some run-in with RiverClan before them."

Flamepaw nodded, though she found his thinking unreasonable. She was glad Barkpaw was still hopeful and trying to keep her spirits up, but it had become a bit obvious that wherever RiverClan had gone, they weren't coming back on their own, not without force anyway.

"Don't you find it strange that none of the other clans have come into our territory?" Flamepaw asked as they came near the ThunderClan border. The border had been left exactly as it had been found. There were no scents of trespassing at all.

"It is odd," Barkpaw remarked. "I would've thought the other clans maybe would have been investigating too, but considering they haven't even come over here...I mean, it's not like they still think RiverClan is here, right?"

"Right," Flamepaw agreed, aware that something suspicious was going on.

"Well, we've made an entire lap," Barkpaw announced as they continued walking. "And nothing new except some stale scents of prey and other animals. Want to make another lap?"

Before, Flamepaw would've immediately agreed, but now, as time passed, her hope seemed to fade more and more, and she shook her head sadly.

"Let's just head back to the camp," she decided.

Barkpaw nodded, and together, they padded through the RiverClan forest, the gurgling river echoing in the distance. Flamepaw sighed, memories flooding back of training with Duskpelt near the river. She hoped that her clan, wherever it was, would be able to hear the familiar sound of the river soon.

Finally, Barkpaw and Flamepaw stepped back inside the RiverClan camp, still finding it completely deserted. Flamepaw always hoped that when she returned, there'd be some member waiting there for them. It didn't even matter to Flamepaw who it was. It could be a young kit of the clan for all she cared. But unfortunately, this was not the case, and Flamepaw resolved to laying out in the weak sun with Barkpaw for the remainder of the

morning, possibilities flowing in her head as she wondered where RiverClan was, why it had not returned, and when she and Barkpaw would be able to find their clanmates and feel a sense of belonging once again.

Chapter 8

Flamepaw awoke on the day of the seventh sunrise with a mixture of emotions. She was anxious, worried, relieved, confused all at the same time. She wanted RiverClan to return today, but a part of her wanted them to not return so that they could begin their search. But then she thought of where they'd start to look, and a whole new sense of emotions would fill her.

The morning was quiet as she and Barkpaw split what would be their last mouse. Flamepaw couldn't hold his gaze as she ate, perhaps because of the truth she was dying to tell him, or perhaps because it was just too complicated to speak today.

As soon as the mouse had been licked clean, both of them sat in silence for a few moments before Barkpaw eventually rose.

"Should we go on a patrol?" he suggested.

Flamepaw nodded, and with her legs shaking, she got to her feet. Before Barkpaw could advance a step, however, she fell back down, heavy sobs seizing her body.

Barkpaw jumped in surprise and rushed to her side.

"Sh, sh, it's okay," he told her, patting her with his striped tail. "We'll figure it out, we'll figure it out," he kept repeating.

Flamepaw shook her head, and with no thought at all, she blurted out, "I love you."

Barkpaw froze and took his tail away, his eyes widened with shock.

"Oh, no, I'm sorry!" she sobbed, turning away. "It's not the right time, but I—"

"I love you, too," was his response.

Flamepaw froze. "What?"

Barkpaw nodded, a genuine look of affection glimmering in his emerald eyes.

"I've loved you for a while, and I was beginning to doubt if you had any feelings for me. I just assumed you thought of me as a friend, and that was all you'd think of me as," Barkpaw confessed.

"Oh, no, Barkpaw, that's not true. I'm sure you've loved me longer, but the feeling has been growing for a while. It was only when the clan left that I realized it for sure," Flamepaw continued.

She rose now, her legs strong enough to stand. "I know this isn't the most appropriate time, but I just thought...if anything happens..."

"Nothing will," Barkpaw assured her. "And you're right, the timing isn't right, and that's a bit unfair, but I know you have my support and I have yours as we look for the clan together. And maybe—maybe if we find them—we can become mates and raise a family."

"Woah, getting far ahead there," Flamepaw shouted, laughing a little. She shoved him lightly, then melted as he nuzzled her affectionately.

"We'll get through this together," he promised her.

Flamepaw nodded, not wanting to pull away from him.

"Shall we go on patrol?" Barkpaw asked.

"Don't really see the point, but sure," Flamepaw agreed, padding into the RiverClan forest with her lover by her side.

A sense of relief flooded over her now that she had confessed her feelings for Barkpaw. His response had filled her with happiness and hope, maybe enough hope to make her look forward to the patrol. Perhaps they would find something that would lead them to RiverClan.

"Anything?" Flamepaw asked as Barkpaw sniffed the air.

"No," he murmured, then paused. "Well, it's something. There's something unfamiliar, but it's faint."

"Let's head by the river," Flamepaw suggested.

Barkpaw nodded, and as they approached the river, Flamepaw could now detect the scent Barkpaw had mentioned earlier. It was odd, and certainly no RiverClan scent. In fact, it didn't smell like any clan cat at all. Perhaps it wasn't even a cat!

Still, excitement flooded Flamepaw's veins as she thought of the possibilities. Maybe whoever this unknown being was would be able to help them find their clan.

As they approached the river, Barkpaw froze.

"What is it?" Flamepaw asked, stopping in her tracks.

"Can't you hear that?" Barkpaw asked.

Flamepaw fell quiet, beginning to pick up chatter coming from the river. As she and Barkpaw crept closer, the shape of two figures appeared. One was a large brown striped tabby tom with a small Siamese she-cat beside him.

Flamepaw watched as the she-cat scooped up a fish and bit into it. The tom only watched.

Anger filled Flamepaw. She knew the clan was technically empty, but these cats were fishing in their territory.

"We should introduce ourselves," Barkpaw suggested.

"What?! Why?!" Flamepaw demanded. "They came into our territory and took our food."

"They may help us find RiverClan," he reminded her.

Flamepaw sighed, and slowly, they approached the two unknown cats whose scents reeked of different forests and lands.

"Um, hello," Flamepaw spoke up.

The Siamese spun around, startled. "Who are you?!"

"The question is, who are you?" Flamepaw asked, a bit annoyed.

"I'm Tigerstripe," the tom said in a deep, masculine voice that nearly frightened Flamepaw. He looked like he could easily slit both Barkpaw and Flamepaw's throats.

"Have you seen a jet black she-cat?" Tigerstripe asked randomly.

"Uh, no," Barkpaw replied. "Who's your friend, Tigerstripe?"

"This is Krait," Tigerstripe said, pointing his bushy tail to the she-cat.

"Have you perhaps seen a clan nearby?" Flamepaw asked. "RiverClan, to be exact?"

"I thought this camp was abandoned," Krait spoke, staring around the territory. "Where are your clanmates? Do you live here? Do you eat this fishy stuff?" she asked, gesturing to the dead fish at her paws.

"Do you think I would be asking you if I knew?" Flamepaw growled.

Before any one could reply, a rustle came from the bushes. The fish Krait had caught must have let off a strong scent, for a large fox came out of the bushes and bristled.

"Uh..." Krait began backing away.

"Give the fish to the fox, Krait," Tigerstripe spoke quietly. "Do you remember last time?"

"What are you talking about?" Flamepaw asked Tigerstripe.

"Long story," he murmured.

Krait quickly knocked the fish towards the fox, but her aim was weak, and it ended up slapping the fox in the face. The fox growled and immediately charged at Krait, leaving the fish behind. The she-cat swiftly moved to the side, but the fox continued

following her.

Flamepaw stood, confused, as Tigerstripe did nothing.

"That's a sure smart she-cat you're traveling with," Barkpaw remarked, laughing as the fox and Krait continued to run in circles.

"Aren't you going after her?" Flamepaw asked Tigerstripe, concerned.

Tigerstripe shook his head. "Not unless she needs help."

Krait began running around in circles, confusing the fox. When she had her chance, she lunged onto the fox's back but missed, landing on the other side of the fox. The fox growled and pinned Krait to the ground. Flamepaw watched as Tigerstripe tensed beside her, ready to take action.

Before the attacker could cause any harm, however, something pulled at its tail. The fox yelped in surprise and released its grip on Krait.

"Hey! Don't you ever harm her!" came a shout. Flamepaw turned, noticing a gray tom cat. She watched as Krait's eyes widened in surprise, as if she'd seen a ghost.

The tom and the fox began to chase each other in circles as Krait had done before. When the tom had his chance, however, he lashed out at the fox, his claws snagging onto the fox's muzzle. He let go, blood drizzling from the muzzle. The fox, tired from fighting, let out one last whimper and fled, leaving the fish behind.

"Who are you?" Tigerstripe asked, rushing to the tom. "And have you seen a jet black she-cat?"

"Do you say that to *every* cat?" Barkpaw asked. Flamepaw nudged him lightly, trying to tell him to shut up.

"DUSTY!" Krait shouted, rushing toward the tom. She nuzzled him affectionately, then continued her excited chatter. "How are the kits? Are they well? Do they miss me?"

"Dusty? Who's that?" Barkpaw whispered to Flamepaw. Flamepaw kept quiet and continued to watch the scene unfold.

"I-I thought you were dead!" Dusty exclaimed.

Krait chuckled. "Do I *look* dead?" She licked his cheek and smiled. "Is Mouse being nice to her sister? Is Nessie eating the whole vole instead of just half? How are they? How are they? How are they?"

Flamepaw watched as Dusty became a bit awkward and began to shuffle his paws.

"Uh, the kits...Yes, the kits...Uh..." He paused for a few

moments, then glanced back into Krait's eyes. "I don't know where they are."

Krait froze, her excitement quickly fading. "You. Lost. The. KITS?!" She then giggled, looking back at Dusty. "You're kidding, right?"

Dusty shuffled his paws once more and shook his head.

"YOU LOST OUR KITS?!"

"Can someone explain what's going on?!" Tigerstripe hissed, almost as confused as Flamepaw and Barkpaw.

Dusty looked past Krait at Tigerstripe. "Who's that?" he wondered.

"Oh, that's Tigerstripe. Tigerstripe, Dusty, my mate. Dusty, Tigerstripe, some cat trying to find another cat. There. Now that we're acquainted, where are the kits?!"

Flamepaw watched as Tigerstripe flinched. He must've never seen the she-cat like this before.

Dusty still shuffled uncomfortably for a little while. "I had them for a little while and then one sunrise, they weren't there."

Krait fluffed up, clearly enraged. "YOU LOST MY KITS! MY ONLY KITS! HOW COULD YOU?!"

She shook Dusty vigorously, screeching, "HOW COULD YOU?!"

Dusty was frozen in place. "I'm sorry! It wasn't my fault!"

"You better run, Dusty," Barkpaw snickered. Flamepaw hit the tom once again.

Krait stared at him in anger as he lowered his head. After a few minutes, Flamepaw watched her muscles relax, and she sighed, saying, "No, it's all right...I will find them."

"What about Jetfur?" Tigerstripe asked, annoyed.

Flamepaw had never been so confused. Now another cat had been thrown into the pile of names.

"Did you say Jetfur?" Dusty asked. "Are you that cat who's looking for her?"

"Yes! Where is she?" Tigerstripe asked anxiously.

"Um, I might have an idea about where the kits are," Dusty suggested to Krait.

"Lead the way," Krait announced.

"But what about Jetfur?" Tigerstripe wondered.

The tom began to move, and Tigerstripe followed behind. Unsure what to do, Flamepaw and Barkpaw ran up with them.

The tom paused in his tracks. "This is kind of a long way," he explained.

Krait shrugged. "We've been traveling so long we don't care if it's another long trip. I'm sure we'll all arrive at the same destination one way or another."

She then turned to Flamepaw and Barkpaw. "You coming?" she asked.

Flamepaw stared at Barkpaw in shock.

"What should we do?" she whispered.

"It's not an immediate answer, but these cats are traveling through the forest. Perhaps we'll run into some clanmate or hear about the clan one the way," Barkpaw explained.

Flamepaw sighed, not sure what to do. But these cats couldn't have just appeared coincidentally. Perhaps her prayers to StarClan had been answered.

"We'll come!" Barkpaw announced.

"Please, just show us Jetfur," Tigerstripe whimpered.

And so, Flamepaw and Barkpaw headed off with the new group of cats, hoping and praying that somehow it would lead them to RiverClan.

Chapter 9

Flamepaw awoke to feel Barkpaw rubbing against her. At first, she believed all that had occurred in the past day had been a dream. She opened her eyes, expecting to find herself in the abandoned RiverClan apprentice den, not a grassy meadow in the middle of the forest.

She purred, feeling his fur brush hers. Everything had happened so fast. Barkpaw had felt the same way about her as she felt about him, and now, they had joined a traveling group of cats, believing that somehow they would be drawn to RiverClan.

As Flamepaw's eyes adjusted to the morning light, she found Krait chatting eagerly with her mate while the large tom, Tigerstripe, paced around them slowly, as if he had more troubling issues on his mind.

It seemed all of the cats were on a search for something. Flamepaw and Barkpaw were hoping that joining these cats would lead them to RiverClan, Krait and Dusty were searching for their kits, and Tigerstripe for some unknown cat.

"Was I keeping everyone?" Flamepaw asked, feeling guilty.

Barkpaw smiled warmly. "No. We all just woke up. Tigerstripe caught us some prey though," he explained, pushing a mouse toward her.

"We can share," Flamepaw suggested.

Barkpaw nodded, and together, the two nibbled on a mouse while Tigerstripe again and again asked Dusty about Jetfur with Krait nagging Dusty from the opposite side about their kits. Flamepaw couldn't help but chuckle a little, though she felt bad for Dusty, seeing as how these cats seemed to rely on him greatly.

They hadn't spoken much to the cats the day before, probably because the whole thing had come as a shock toward them. Here Flamepaw had been expecting to search alone with Barkpaw for her clan, but now she had three older and stronger cats traveling with them. Having more company comforted her somewhat, reminding her of a clan almost.

After breakfast, they began their journey again, Dusty leading the way.

"So are we going toward Jetfur or not?" Tigerstripe asked.

"I-I don't remember much about her or her whereabouts," Dusty admitted.

"But you said—"

"And what about our kits?" Krait added. "Shouldn't they be on our mind right now?"

"Hey, it was you who agreed to come with me on a search for Jetfur," Tigerstripe growled to Krait.

"Well, I believed my kits were still safely with my mate," she argued.

Though they seemed angry with each other, it was all playful, and it seemed the two got along better than they seemed. They must've been traveling for some time before stumbling into the RiverClan camp.

Flamepaw and Barkpaw remained silent as they trotted with the group of cats, watching as Dusty occasionally glanced around and sniffed the air. She wondered if he even had a clue of where he was going. He seemed as lost as Flamepaw and Barkpaw were detecting RiverClan scents.

"So you're from that fishy clan, eh?" Krait interrupted, turning her gaze to Flamepaw and Barkpaw.

"Well, she is," Barkpaw said.

"Not so fast," Flamepaw teased. "You're a member of the clan too."

""Where's he from?" Krait asked, pointing to Barkpaw.

"LightningClan," Barkpaw explained.

"I'm a native RiverClan warrior," Flamepaw added.

"Clan cats," Krait muttered. "All the same if you ask me."

"Hey!" Tigerstripe growled.

"Kidding, kidding," Krait replied, chuckling quietly. Despite the fact her kits were missing, she seemed to be in a good mood. Perhaps she believed they were doing fine on her own. Then again, Flamepaw wasn't sure how old her kits actually were and was too scared to bring up the subject.

"So your clan went missing?" Dusty asked from up ahead.

"Basically," Flamepaw replied.

"How did you not disappear with them?" Krait wondered.

She and Barkpaw both glanced away, embarassed.

"We went on a moonlit walk at night in secret and accidentally fell asleep in the forest," Flamepaw explained.

"And when we returned, the clan had vanished," Barkpaw finished.

"Better than my clan's falling apart," Tigerstripe muttered.

Flamepaw eyed him with curiosity. She knew Tigerstripe was a warrior of some clan, but she was too frightened to ask what clan he'd come from. He towered over both Barkpaw and Tigerstripe, his giant muscles flexing with each step. A few pale scars covered his legs, most likely from combat. Flamepaw wondered where he'd gotten them from.

"We're hoping to gather some information about them or maybe find them by joining you," Flamepaw explained.

"Well, let's hope so," Krait replied, grinning.

"Who's the cat you're looking for again, Tigerstripe?" Barkpaw asked.

Flamepaw glanced at Barkpaw, wondering how he could talk to the tom so easily. Tigerstripe seemed so intimidating to Flamepaw. The words they exchanged were short and carried no meaning.

"Jetfur," he said. "You haven't seen a she-cat with a jet black pelt, have you?"

Barkpaw shook his head.

Tigerstripe sighed.

Perhaps he isn't so tough after all, Flamepaw wondered. *After all, he seems very concerned about finding this she-cat.*

"Who is she? Your mate?" Barkpaw asked.

Flamepaw immediately watched Tigerstripe blush incredibly.

"What-I-no!" he shouted. "She's just a clanmate. We were traveling together when we got separated by a storm."

"Oh, my apologies," Barkpaw replied.

Still, Flamepaw eyed Tigerstripe with suspicion. She knew it was none of her business, but she had a feeling Tigerstripe might have regarded Jetfur in a different way other than friendship. The way he had reacted to Barkpaw's comment surely confirmed that.

The conversation fell rather short after that, and they continued on their way in the unknown forest, Flamepaw keeping her eyes peeled for any sign of movement or for any familiar RiverClan scents. There was no mistaking the salty scent that rose from RiverClan cats.

Of course, she'd been told this many times already. Krait

seemed to comment on it every hour, stating, "What reeks of fish?" before turning around and realizing it to be Barkpaw and Flamepaw. At first, Flamepaw believed she was serious in not knowing that it was Barkpaw and herself giving off the odor, but after awhile, Flamepaw saw it was only a joke.

Flamepaw seemed to like Krait the most out of the bunch. Though she had witnessed Krait's breakdown only a day before, Krait was stubborn, witty, and overall, likeable. She helped to lighten the mood a bit despite her own struggles she was dealing with.

When they stopped to hunt for a bit, Flamepaw scoured the ground for any type of prey, be it a bird or rabbit. Krait, meanwhile, came over to her side.

"Need some fish?" she asked.

"Sure would be nice," Flamepaw replied, dreamily imagining herself biting into a salty and delectable fish. It was a RiverClan cat's main diet, but was she really a RiverClan cat anymore? Her clan was gone, meaning she needed to adapt to other cat ways. It seemed Tigerstripe had adjusted to a life was a rogue, or whatever Krait and Dusty were. They surely weren't kittypets.

"I don't understand your obsession with that salty substance," Krait murmured.

"I don't either," Barkpaw replied, sparking a laugh from Krait.

"Hey, I thought you liked it!" Flamepaw argued.

"Well, not as much as you RiverClan cats do. I don't understand how you can gulp down a fish every day. I get tired of the taste after awhile," Barkpaw admitted.

"Well, I'm sorry our eating habits aren't up to par," Flamepaw joked.

By the end of their hunting session, they were all full and satisfied, Flamepaw and Barkpaw splitting a squirrel that Flamepaw had just managed to catch at the last second. She had nearly missed it if she hadn't grabbed its tail with her claws in time.

After their meal, they continued on through the forest for the remainder of the day, occasionally sharing stories and chatting quietly among each other. Dusty continued leading the way, though Flamepaw was certain as the day passed that he had no idea where he was going and was simply leading them randomly through the forest. Perhaps she was wrong though and had misjudged the gray

tom.

When it did finally become time for the cats to settle down as the sunlight was beginning to vanish, the cats searched for some type of shelter before finding a small cave close to some nearby trees. After a close inspection to make sure no animal was occupying the cave, all five cats curled up inside, Flamepaw curling up right alongside Barkpaw. She pressed her face against his warm fur and purred, Barkpaw purring back. Warm and exhausted from a long day of traveling, Flamepaw soon found herself fast asleep with Barkpaw by her side.

Chapter 10

Flamepaw was aroused by Barkpaw's gentle lick on her cheek. She slowly opened her eyes, watching the sunlight gleam off his striped pelt. His green eyes shone brightly in the sunlight, causing Flamepaw to purr in satisfaction.

"Wake up, sleepyhead," Barkpaw murmured jokingly, his eyes twinkling with amusement.

Flamepaw let out a quiet laugh and gently pushed him aside, her heart pounding each time he looked at her. She was glad she and Barkpaw had expressed their love for each other. But to think of the future...of them being mates...it had to be put off until the clan situation was solved. She couldn't have him entirely yet.

It had been a few more days since the cats had taken off on their expedition, and Flamepaw still had no idea where Krait was leading them. She wasn't even sure what the objective was. Was it to look for that cat Jetfur that Tigerstripe kept mentioning? Was it to look for her kits? Flamepaw assumed the latter, but she had a feeling Tigerstripe thought otherwise.

Meanwhile, there had been no interaction with RiverClan cats. Though Flamepaw had been disappointed, she knew this was better than lying around camp all day waiting for her clanmates to never appear. Still, a part of her wondered if maybe they had returned by now and this whole quest was just a waste of her and Barkpaw's time.

Flamepaw had expressed these doubts to Barkpaw only the night prior, but he had calmly pushed them aside and let her know that this was their best option. Flamepaw just hoped that they'd hear some news about RiverClan soon. She was beginning to get impatient.

She'd talked plenty with Krait already, asking her as much as she could, but the Siamese had not seen nor heard of the clan

until Flamepaw had mentioned it. Apparently she and Tigerstripe had been traveling quite some time together and had not come across any new cats besides Flamepaw and Barkpaw.

When Flamepaw tried speaking to Dusty, he admitted the same, claiming he'd seen no new cats and heard nothing of RiverClan. Flamepaw's heart sank with every account, and she felt farther away from RiverClan than closer.

She kept her distance from Tigerstripe, still fearful of the tom. She decided to take Krait's word for it that he had seen nothing either. After all, she had heard mentions of him previously belonging to a vicious clan that had slaughtered many cats in battle. She wasn't exactly eager to become friends with the menacing tom.

It seemed prey had already been caught for breakfast. Flamepaw found Krait and Dusty sharing a mouse together (it seemed Krait had forgiven him for losing their children by this time) while Tigerstripe munched on a squirrel by himself.

"You're going to love me for this," Barkpaw spoke excitedly, padding over toward the others.

"For what?" Flamepaw asked.

"I caught a fish!" he exclaimed, picking up a scaly fish from the ground. Flamepaw squealed in excitement, her stomach rumbling.

She had not had a fish since they had taken off on their journey since they were rarely by rivers and streams. When they were, it was not often to fish, and with Barkpaw and Flamepaw being the only ones who knew how to catch fish anyway, it wasn't like they wanted to keep the others waiting. In addition, it seemed forest prey was more common, and while Flamepaw could choke down a mouse, she longed for the salty taste of fish.

"Sorry I slept in again," Flamepaw murmured as she sat down across from Barkpaw. He bit into the fish and shook his head.

"You helped us find this little clearing last night. Krait

insisted you needed rest. Plus, I was able to catch this amazing fish for us," Barkpaw explained.

Flamepaw giggled and took a bite, humming as the wonderful flavor filled her mouth. Just the previous night, all of the cats were struggling trying to find a nearby place to rest. The sun had already gone down, and they'd been traveling in darkness. Flamepaw had gone ahead and had fortunately stumbled upon a tiny clearing with some rocks and logs for shade. The others had been very pleased with her discovery.

If I'm good at finding things, she thought, *then please let me find RiverClan soon.*

She had been praying to StarClan nightly, asking for a sign. Each night she secretly wished she would arrive in StarClan in her dreams, but she had not had a connection towards StarClan since Gingerkit had spoken to her many many moons ago.

Where are you now, Gingerkit? she wondered. *Are you still looking out for me?*

Flamepaw quickly gobbled up the rest of the fish, her stomach and taste buds satisfied. Barkpaw seemed thrilled that Flamepaw had enjoyed the meal so much.

"Well, let's quit laying around and get going already!" Tigerstripe growled as the cats continued to lounge around after a morning meal.

"Calm down, grumpyhead," Krait said lightly, rising to her feet. "We were just about to get going."

"Good," Tigerstripe grunted, looking very disappointed.

He must want to find this cat, Jetfur, very much, Flamepaw observed, noticing how his paws twitched with impatience as Dusty rose to his feet.

Once again, the destination seemed unclear, and Dusty began to lead the way into the woods, the cats following behind. The cats followed their usual structure of walking, Dusty and Krait

leading the way, Tigerstripe planted in the middle, and Flamepaw and Barkpaw following behind.

Flamepaw couldn't help but feel a bit sorry for Tigerstripe. Dusty and Krait were always so lively in their chatting, and Barkpaw and Flamepaw often chatted behind him. Flamepaw always tried to keep her voice down, not really wanting the tom to overhear her conversations (no matter what the content consisted of). Still, he'd sometimes turn around and glance at them, maybe just to make sure they were there, but it still frightened her.

She supposed the tom was lonely, and she had suspicions that Jetfur was more than a friend to him. Seeing the others chatting with close friends and mates probably upset him more than he liked to admit. Still, Flamepaw wasn't going to question him.

They continued through the never-changing forest under the leaf-fall sun. The trees were tall as ever, the leaves multicolored, the dirt the same. It seemed like they'd barely left the forest they had first entered.

Still, the scents were new, and being in this environment sort of made Flamepaw excited. She'd gone on her quest for Goldstar, of course, but this was an entirely new part of the forest, and she wondered what new excitements awaited.

Her mind drifted to Korosu quickly, but she quickly shook her head, the red eyes vanishing from her mind.

"You okay?" Barkpaw asked, noticing her quick movement.

"Fine," Flamepaw replied. He nodded and continued on as if nothing had happened.

Perhaps a part of Flamepaw wanted this to be like the quest she had first pursued on as an apprentice. She had not enjoyed the misery and dangers of the trip, but she had enjoyed the adventure and being with her clanmates. Her heart longed to be back with them now, and she kept reminding herself that soon she'd be with RiverClan again. They couldn't be gone forever.

"Hey," came a voice from ahead.

Flamepaw glanced up to see Tigerstripe staring at them, his piercing green eyes fixed on her as if he were staring into her soul.

"Wh-what is it?" she stammered, pausing for a moment.

"Hey, don't slow down," Barkpaw told her, nudging at her to keep walking again. Tigerstripe fell back alongside of Flamepaw, and she became stiff, frightened at what he'd do.

"What's up?" Barkpaw asked Tigerstripe, trying to spark some conversation.

"So your clan just disappeared, huh?" Tigerstripe wondered.

Flamepaw glanced at him with curiousity, wondering why he was so interested, and she slowly nodded her head, unable to talk for fear her voice would come out in a squeal of fear.

"That's tough," Tigerstripe admitted.

"It is," Barkpaw answered for her. "Flamepaw here was born in RiverClan though, so it's got to be tougher on her."

"Where are you from?" Tigerstripe wondered.

"Was born a rogue. My parents left my sisters and me in LightningClan. Bad clan all around, really. We had very few members, some dogs attacked one day, and that was that. I got separated from my sisters trying to drive off the dogs. I doubt they survived. And then one day I stumbled upon Flamepaw and her clanmates, and I've been a RiverClan member ever since," Barkpaw explained.

Flamepaw stared at him in disbelief. Why was he telling his entire backstory to this unknown tom? Barkpaw glanced at her oddly and shrugged, looking back at Tigerstripe.

"Yeah, I know how that feels. My clan failed too. Been a rogue since though," Tigerstripe sighed, clearly sounding unhappy.

"You could always join a clan," Barkpaw suggested.

"I can't be a clan cat," Tigerstripe explained.

"Sure you can. Most clans are willing to take any cats in for new members," Barkpaw spoke cheerfully.

Tigerstripe shook his head, muttering, "You don't...I just can't."

Flamepaw stared at him oddly, wondering what he was keeping from them. They padded silently until their next break, and afterwards, Tigerstripe took his spot in the middle again, his forced conversation apparently not pleasing him.

And so they continued on for the rest of the day just like they normally did, and once again, Flamepaw found no new clues, no new signs, that RiverClan was nearby. As she laid down to sleep that night, she prayed once more that RiverClan would appear soon. If only she believed StarClan was actually listening.

Chapter 11

Flamepaw awoke to another day, finding Barkpaw still nestled close to her. They had spent the night in a tiny clearing after yet another long day of walking through the forest with what seemed like no destination.

Once again, Flamepaw and Barkpaw had heard or seen nothing of RiverClan, just as Flamepaw expected, and she was beginning to become anxious. She was just wishing that something would happen or that Dusty knew where he was taking them. What was the goal of the group of cats? Was it to find Krait's kits? Was it to find Jetfur? Flamepaw didn't even know anymore.

Within a few minutes, Barkpaw had stirred beside her, muttering a sleepy, "Good morning," which caused Flamepaw to laugh and lick his cheek in a loving manner. If it weren't for Barkpaw, she wasn't sure how she'd make it through the day.

As soon as the cats were up, they wolfed down a quick breakfast and began on their journey once again. Flamepaw sighed and rose to her feet, assuming the usual traveling position in the back with Barkpaw. Tigerstripe had not tried to make any more contact with them, which had pleased Flamepaw since she was frightened by the tom, but at times she still felt sorry for him, that he was going through this all alone.

As they walked along the forest, Flamepaw watched as the sun slowly began to disappear from the sky and was replaced by rolling gray clouds. She sighed, hoping it wouldn't rain soon. She knew the cats would not stop unless the rain was terrible, and she didn't exactly want to hike through the pouring rain with her pelt soaking.

The rain didn't come though, but the temperature cooled down, and a wind began to pick up. She watched Tigerstripe tense at the signs of a coming storm, wondering if perhaps that he, the strong, scary tom, was frightened of storms. She laughed a little

thinking about this.

As they came up a hill, Flamepaw watched as Dusty froze suddenly, his ears pricked. Before Flamepaw could question why he stopped, she began to hear a distant sound of barking.

"What was that?" Dusty asked.

Barkpaw pricked his ears, then shrugged. "I'm not sure."

Flamepaw kept her ears pricked, wondering what that odd sound had been. It had almost sounded like...dogs.

As soon as these thoughts went through her brain, the barking became louder, and immediately recognized it as the sound of dog barks. In fact, she and the other cats were even able to make out some of the words being spoken.

"POSSIBILITY! BUT, UM, VERY SLIM! YEAH!" came large shouts. Flamepaw shuddered, knowing more than one dog had to be present. She imagined it coming at them with its sharp teeth and ripping them to shreds.

"What is that?" Tigerstripe asked, annoyed.

The voices began to sound like they were coming closer, and Flamepaw jumped as she heard one say, "Come on!"

"Should we check it out?" Dusty asked curiously.

"Of course!" Krait answered quickly.

"Yes, dear," Dusty muttered quietly.

Tigerstripe, Flamepaw, and Barkpaw began to follow Dusty and Krait toward the growing sound, but Flamepaw grew more nervous with each step. Were they insane going after these dogs? Didn't they know two-leg dogs were dangerous and could rip them to shreds?

As they approached the growing sound, Flamepaw froze, noticing four canine figures behind some tall bushes. Krait quietly

sneaked into the bushes and pulled Dusty inside. Flamepaw, Barkpaw, and Tigerstripe all followed, their eyes glued to the unknown dogs.

"We need to get away from these dogs," Tigerstripe growled, his eyes focused on them. As Flamepaw stared at them, she noticed that they seemed to be doing no harm, but she had to agree with Tigerstripe on this one. Dogs weren't to be trusted, considering their reputation with cats.

"Maybe they're friendly," Barkpaw suggested, which caused Flamepaw to look at him in disbelief. Since when were dogs ever friendly? And why did Barkpaw, a tom who had lost his clan and family to dogs, think so highly of them?

Tigerstripe glanced around at the cats. "They don't seem to be bothering us," he observed. "Let's just keep walking."

Krait's fur settled down a bit, and she nodded. "I guess you're right. Let's get out of here before they notice us."

Flamepaw sighed in relief and quietly exited the bushes with the rest of the cats, glad they were getting away from the potential danger. Soon enough, they began to walk again, slowly leaving the dogs and their annoying barks behind.

As they walked however, Flamepaw watched Krait turn and glance oddly toward the right. Flamepaw turned too, noticing the canine figures run by without even noticing the cats. She paused, wondering why they were in a hurry.

"What are they running from?" Dusty wondered.

"Whatever it is, I hope we don't get involved," Krait grumpily replied.

Flamepaw nodded, continuing to follow behind Krait. As they walked, she noticed Krait kept looking in the direction of where the dogs had been running. They were still visible from afar, and Flamepaw watched as one glanced at Krait. Krait immediately turned away, and that was the last she ever looked that way.

The cats kept walking until they heard one of the dogs yelp and start running clumsily. Krait's eyes widened, and gasped, "Did you see that?!"

Dusty nodded. "It was slightly out of the ordinary."

"*Slightly*? What if that shooting thing hits us?" she growled. Flamepaw froze. What did she mean by shooting thing? She hadn't seen anything.

A powerful boom echoed through the forest, and Barkpaw shouted, "RUN!"

All of the cats began to pick up their pace and raced through the forest, running as fast as their legs could carry them. Flamepaw watched as Dusty stopped suddenly to watch one of the bigger dogs fall to the floor, obviously hit by whatever weapon was being used against it.

"DON'T JUST STAND THERE LIKE A MOUSEBRAIN!" Krait shouted at her mate. "RUN, DUSTY, RUN!"

Dusty shook his head, coming out of the daze, and he began to catch up with the rest of the cats again. Flamepaw's heart beat rapidly, and fear ran through her veins. She thought back to her previous quest with Korosu and the foxes and held back tears, hating when she found herself in these dangerous situations.

"I THINK THAT DOG IS HAVING KITS!" he shouted as soon as he caught up with the rest of the cats again.

"IT'S NONE OF OUR CONCERN!" Krait hissed, continuing to run.

"Don't you mean pups?" Tigerstripe asked him.

Dusty gave a quick nod, and another large boom echoed behind them.

"RUN!" Tigerstripe shouted, forcing the cats to quicken their pace. Flamepaw did as she was told, though she felt her limbs growing sore and weak, and she wasn't sure how much longer she'd

be able to keep up this pace.

Suddenly, some two-legs burst out of the bushes holding fire-sticks in their weirdly shaped paws.

Tigerstripe yowled in surprise, and all of the cats turned and ran in the opposite direction, trying to flee from the two-legs.

As they raced, Flamepaw turned to see another group of two-legs had gone in the opposite direction, presumably after the dogs, but it was all a blur as she raced through the forest.

The two-legs trailed close behind, and Flamepaw watched as one reached forward and grabbed Dusty by the scruff. The gray tom yowled and flailed his legs, but the two-leg had a good grasp.

Krait gasped and slowed down her pace. Hissing aggressively, she unsheathed her claws. Flamepaw, furious at the two-leg, hissed at the hunter and turned toward him, biting down hard on his leg. Her teeth sunk into his skin easily, and she watched as he yelped and dropped Dusty back to the forest floor.

Dusty landed with a thud and whirled around, bristling. Krait meanwhile slashed at the two-leg's other leg, causing blood to seep out and stain his pants. The fire-stick holder yowled with pain and clamped his paw on his leg. Another one clumsily almost dropped his fire-stick and staggering, aimed it at Krait.

Tigerstripe hissed and jumped on the two-leg who was aiming at Krait. He bit as leg just as Flamepaw had done, but it seemed he did not do it hard enough.

The two-leg screamed but in that moment still managed to shoot Krait. Flamepaw gasped as the metal figure hit Krait, who yelped in complete and utter shock. It had gotten into her shoulder, and Flamepaw already noticed how badly the blood began to soak into her cream coat. Another two-leg hollered angrily at the one who had shot Krait, causing Flamepaw to wonder what they were arguing about. Didn't they want to kill all the cats?

Dusty ran over to his mate, shouting, "KRAIT! ARE YOU

ALL RIGHT?!"

Krait, still in shock from the impact, managed to nod her head a little. Krait stared at her wounded shoulder, and for a moment, Flamepaw sighed in relief, knowing Krait was alive. Then, a third two-leg who at the time had been doing nothing pointed his fire-stick at Krait.

Tigerstripe and Barkpaw both lunged at the two-leg and bit down on his ankle, causing the two-leg to drop his heavy fire-stick on Barkpaw's head. Meanwhile, Dusty was trying to stop Krait from bleeding any more.

Barkpaw fell to the ground, and Flamepaw immediately rushed to his side in worry.

"Barkpaw!" she called.

He slowly lifted his head, revealing a large bump. He got up slowly, shaking himself off.

"I-I'm okay," he managed to say. Flamepaw sighed in relief, for a moment believing he was dead.

The two-leg finally had his chance, and his fire-stick boomed as Krait was shot once more in the other shoulder.

"NO, KRAIT!" Dusty yowled painfully.

"KRAIT!" Tigerstripe yowled, running over to the fallen she-cat.

Krait was breathing heavily, and her eyes were slowly beginning to close. Flamepaw stared at her in disbelief. Krait couldn't be dying, not after all they'd been through.

"No, Krait!" Tigerstripe called. "We have to find Jetfur, remember?"

Krait shook her head. "C-Can't now," she said softly. "I will see you again in StarClan," she said to both Dusty and Tigerstripe. Krait's eyes shut all the way, and Flamepaw knew at once she was

dead. Then, one of the two-legs grabbed her and carefully put her in a cage.

"NO!" Tigerstripe screeched, staring at the two-legs wandering away in disbelief.

"I'm sorry," Flamepaw whispered to Tigerstripe and Dusty. She had not known the she-cat as well as they had, and she knew losing Krait must have been much harder for them.

"KRAIT, I CAN'T LOSE YOU!" Dusty shouted. "WHY DID YOU HAVE TO DIE? WHY?!"

Flamepaw sighed, then froze, noticing that some two-legs were still present with their fire-sticks pointed directly at the group of cats.

Chapter 12

Flamepaw froze next to the others, shutting her eyes tightly. Was this the end? She stood proudly, awaiting the two-legs to kill her as they did Krait.

Suddenly, however, one of the two-legs yowled, and Flamepaw reopened her eyes to find that a massive wolf had leapt onto one of the two-legs and had knocked him over. The other two-legs were shocked, and they turned their gaze away from the cats and instead scrambled to shoot the large wolf.

They fired their fire-sticks poorly, while meanwhile Flamepaw and the others stood in utter confusion, curious as to why this wolf had saved their lives.

Suddenly, one of the bullets hit the wolf's shoulder, and the wolf fell to the ground, moaning in pain. As soon as he hit the floor, Flamepaw watched in shock as small black puppy fled out of the bushes, running toward the fallen wolf.

Her legs suddenly able to move again, Flamepaw too rushed over to the fallen wolf and found blood pouring out of his shoulder.

"HE'S HURT!" Flamepaw shouted toward the others.

"Hurt?" asked Dusty. Dusty clumsily ran toward the wolf, the others following behind him. As Dusty stared intently at the wolf, Flamepaw glanced around, noticing the two-legs were still present and seemed to have regained their senses.

The small puppy leapt at one of the hunters and bit down on his foot, causing him to shriek. Meanwhile, the wolf slowly tried to make his way to his feet, but collapsed in failure. Flamepaw frowned, not wanting to witness the death of the wolf too.

The two-leg finally managed to shake the puppy off, and he and the other two-legs at last ran away, leaving all of the animals

alone. Flamepaw sighed in relief, though reality had seemed to hit her. Krait was dead, this wolf had saved their lives, and now he too was dying.

The wolf managed to make his way to his feet, and this time, he stood firmly, despite the terrible wincing faces he was making. The young puppy rushed to his side and began helping him walk through the same bushes she had emerged.

Flamepaw decided to follow alongside, despite the odd glances she was getting from the others. She trotted alongside the wolf and glanced up at him, noticing at how he towered over her.

"Thank you for saving us," she told the wolf.

"You're welcome," the wolf replied weakly.

"You helped us, now we help you!" Dusty exclaimed, calling the others to walk alongside the wolf.

They slowly made their way through the dense bushes that the wolf and dog had seemed to emerge from. As Flamepaw slowly made her way through, she gasped in surprise to see yet another black puppy identical to the other and a pure white wolf with five suckling pups pushed against her belly. They seemed to have just been born.

"Are the pups okay?" the wolf asked the other desperately.

"Lupin, you're hurt!" the white she-wolf exclaimed. He padded over to her side, and she immediately began licking his wounds with her soft pink tongue.

"Your name is Lupin?" Flamepaw asked the tom.

He nodded slowly.

"Lupin, who are these cats?" the she-wolf asked oddly.

"Lupin risked his life for them!" the puppy who had driven off the two-legs answered.

The she-wolf raised an eyebrow. "You always must save them, must you?"

"I couldn't save Seven. I-I wanted to save someone," she heard Lupin mutter.

Who's Seven? Flamepaw wondered.

"Lupin was very brave," Barkpaw spoke up at last, his head still a bit swollen from the fire-stick dropping on his head.

"Why don't we introduce ourselves?" Dusty suggested.

"Why?" Tigerstripe growled. "We've made the introduction. Now we must head on our way."

"But Lupin's hurt," Flamepaw argued. "We should help him first. He did save our lives, you know."

She got a glare from Tigerstripe, but he seemed to obey. She supposed she shouldn't be too tough on him. After all, he was most likely suffering from the death of Krait as well. He, however, couldn't be as composed as Dusty.

"My name is Lupin, but you already know that," the injured wolf explained, laying back down and licking his shoulder. "This is my mate, Breeze."

The beautiful white wolf dipped her head. "How do you do?"

"Fine, thank you," Flamepaw replied. "Your pups look brand new, Breeze."

"They were born only minutes ago," she explained. "That's why we couldn't flee completely. I couldn't move when I knew they were going to be born at any minute."

"They're beautiful," Dusty purred.

"I'm Holly!" one of the black puppies squeaked. "And that's my sister, Rose," she said, pointing to the other puppy. "We're

purebred Newfoundland dogs!"

Flamepaw tilted her head, unsure of what that meant, but it didn't look like the puppies were going to attack her, so she remained calm.

"My name is Flamepaw," she explained. "And this is Barkpaw," she said, pointing to her tabby friend. "And then there's Dusty," she said, her tail pointing to the gray tom, "and lastly, Tigerstripe," she said.

"We're very grateful to you for saving our lives," Barkpaw explained, dipping his head.

"What's on your head, dear?" Breeze asked.

"Got hit by a firestick, but I'm feeling better," Barkpaw argued.

Lupin stared at Dusty. "I'm sorry I couldn't save your she-cat friend."

Both Dusty and Tigerstripe stared down at their paws in despair, and Flamepaw frowned, the reality not hitting her that Krait was really gone. She still expected the Siamese to pop out of the bushes unharmed and cracking a joke to all of them. Boy, she would've loved to meet all these dogs and wolves.

"Well, we promise to help you until you get better, Lupin," Flamepaw proposed.

"You cats have odd names," Rose barked.

"Some of us are clan cats," Flamepaw explained. "Have you heard of a clan called RiverClan or seen any nearby?"

All dogs and wolves shook their heads.

"Beats me. Never heard of it," Lupin muttered. He was trying to act calm and collected, but Flamepaw noticed the way he seemed to be avoiding showing any signs of pain. She guessed he was trying to remain calm for Breeze, but Flamepaw knew his

shoulder must've pained him very heavily. It was a miracle he could even walk over to his mate through the bushes. She hoped he hadn't made his injuries worse.

Oh, what I would do for Mothwing right now, she thought.

"I hate to ruin the fun, but we should probably get out of here to somewhere safer," Tigerstripe proposed. "The two-legs may come back, and when they do, they'll be prepared this time."

Dusty nodded beside him, his eyes glimmering with tears. Flamepaw sighed, wishing this had all just been a nightmare and not a reality.

"I agree," Breeze said, nodding. "But my pups aren't strong enough yet to be moved. And how could we possibly carry Lupin?"

"I can stand up," Lupin growled, trying to rise to his feet. Within a few seconds, however, he was back on the ground, licking away at his wound.

Breeze frowned and glanced at her large white paws. "I might be able to carry one or two pups, but how would you all carry the others? I don't think you cats would be able to carry a full-grown wolf."

"You got us there," Barkpaw sighed.

"There's got to be something we can do!" Dusty argued.

"I wish we had a medicine cat with us," Flamepaw sighed. "I used to help out Mothwing in the medicine cat den sometimes, but I don't know much about herbs, and I certainly don't know anything about treating a wound like that," she explained, pointing to the deep, bloody wound in Lupin's shoulder.

Lupin sighed, and Flamepaw began to fear that he wouldn't recover and might possibly die. She didn't want the wolf who had risked so much to save them to die, not after his mate had just given birth to his five children.

"Well, there's got to be something we can do," Tigerstripe

explained. "We can't just very well leave him like this. That wound will kill him eventually."

Breeze gasped, but Lupin sighed, glancing down in defeat.

"We'll-we'll think of something," Flamepaw stuttered, though right now, she was completely out of any ideas. It was impossible to figure out how to treat this wound. She'd never had a close experience with two-legs before. How was she supposed to know how to treat the wounds made by their weapons?

"MOUSEBRAINS!" came a shout from the bushes.

Flamepaw froze, at first believing it was Krait. But the noise was too unrecognizable. She paused, watching in a flash as a sudden yowl came and a cat came rolling out of the bushes, bounding right over to her and knocking over Flamepaw.

Flamepaw fell to the ground, standing up and growling at the unknown cat.

"HEY! WATCH IT!" she shouted angrily. The last thing she needed was more injuries and more trouble. "WHO ARE YOU?!"

Regaining her focus and standing up, she realized the cat had a calico color. And as the cat turned around, Flamepaw suddenly froze, immediately recognizing the she-cat.

"Mothwing?!" she gasped.

Chapter 13

Flamepaw froze as she and Mothwing locked eyes, and in a moment, her heart was bursting with excitement. Never had she been so excited to see the calico she-cat in her life!

"Flamepaw?" Mothwing gasped, her eyes widened with the same excitement and confusion. "What are you doing way out here?"

"Oh, it was terrible, Mothwing!" Flamepaw exclaimed. "Barkpaw and I accidentally fell asleep on the forest while...um, hunting, and when we returned, the entire clan had disappeared! So we joined Tigerstripe, Dusty, and Kr—" She paused, the cold reality of Krait's death hitting her. "Tigerstripe and Dusty. Tigerstripe was looking for a black cat named Jetfur, and Dusty was on the search for his kits. And just recently we were attacked by hunters, but this wolf saved us," she said, gesturing to Lupin.

Mothwing glanced at the injured wolf, bewildered for a moment, before turning back to Flamepaw. She let out a long sigh and sat back down, her eyes fixed on Flamepaw's.

"Is that so?" she wondered quietly.

Both Flamepaw and Barkpaw nodded slowly.

"Well," she continued, "it just so happens that I know where the clan is."

Both Flamepaw and Barkpaw exchanged looks of excitement, and Flamepaw's face spread into a wide smile. Her heart beat rapidly, and she leapt up and down.

"YOU DO?! WHERE ARE THEY?!" she exclaimed, desperately wanting to see all her clanmates again. Oh, it would be so great to have Dusktail mentor her again and to have her mother greet her each morning and to curl up in the apprentice den with

Barkpaw at night.

The medicine cat sighed, and Flamepaw immediately knew the news could not be good.

"It all happened so suddenly," she began. "The same night you and Barkpaw were in the woods, this mucky colored tom who called himself 'Swampstar,' I believe." She paused, then nodded. "Yes, yes, it was Swampstar. He came with many of his clanmates to our clan. At first, we believed it to be the whole clan because there were so many, but apparently this was only a portion of his clan.

"Swampstar had begun a new clan named SwampClan, and though he seemed to have many members with him, he desired more. We were easily outnumbered, and he demanded that Goldstar and the rest of RiverClan join his clan. Goldstar, StarClan praise her, obviously refused. But then he mentioned how his clan was going to be killed because of...some other clan. I forgot the name. Of course, Goldstar still refused, claiming that it was none of RiverClan's business and that he should deal with his own problems.

"But then Swampstar really hit her hard. He said he would kill each and every cat, including her, if she did not come. And he was serious, Flamepaw. I could see the wild look in his eyes. Goldstar had no choice but to accept, and we were whisked away by SwampClan," Mothwing explained.

Both Flamepaw and Barkpaw sat for a moment, dumbfounded, when Flamepaw suddenly cried out, exasperated.

"NO!" she gasped, seeing how unfair it all was. "SHE JOINED AN EVIL CLAN?!" Flamepaw shook her head vigorously, furious at Goldstar, even though she knew the she-cat had made the right choice.

"I AM *NOT* JOINING AN EVIL CLAN!" she declared.

She felt Barkpaw lightly touch his tail to her shoulder, and slowly she settled down.

"That's exactly what I thought," Mothwing agreed. "I tried to

sneak away, but a patrol caught me. They started chasing me, and I eventually managed to outrun them. And then, I ran into you."

Flamepaw smiled weakly, glad to have Mothwing here, but the clan's fate was still swarming through her head.

Mothwing then turned toward Lupin and gasped, as if she had not noticed him earlier.

"Oh, StarClan! What a sight!" she exclaimed. "I mean, no offense, but you look terrible!"

"He was shot by some hunters," Breeze explained. "He is badly injured, and I don't know how we can move him and my newborn pups." Her eyes then widened suddenly. "Oh, I forgot to name them!"

Mothwing whirled around to the white wolf, exclaiming, "You had puppies?! Oh, dear. Are they all right?"

Breeze nodded. "Perfectly fine," she explained, glancing down at the sleeping pups. "The hunters did not bother me at all. Holly and Rose here protected me."

Rose and Holly both nodded and stood proudly, puffing out their fluffy chests.

"Go on and name them!" Rose barked.

Breeze smiled. "Well, all right," she said, turning her gaze to Lupin.

Lupin smiled weakly in response. "Go ahead, Breeze. Name them."

Breeze smiled, glancing down at one of the larger pups, a white male. "This will be Blizzard," she decided. She then turned to the other white pup, a female. "And this will be Cloud." She then turned her gaze toward the largest female wolf with timber markings. "This will be Dapple." She turned her gaze to another female wolf with timber markings, those her markings were a bit more red-like. "And this will be Squirrel."

Lastly, she turned her gaze to a male pup that resembled Lupin the best. She grinned, and then slowly said, "And this will be...Seven." Beside her, both Rose and Holly whimpered, and Flamepaw glanced around in confusion, wondering what they were so torn up about.

"Seven? What an interesting name," Mothwing remarked. She then went over to Lupin and immediately began inspecting his wound.

"This looks bad," she admitted, coming closer to get a better look. "What is that? A rock?" she asked, confused.

"I believe the two-legs called it a bullet," he explained.

"Well, whatever you call it, it must come out," Mothwing said. She gently grabbed the bullet between her sharp teeth and yanked it out, causing Lupin to let a loud yowl. His yowl was so loud, one of his sleeping pups awoke and began to whimper quietly. He immediately began licking his wound, wincing at the pain.

Mothwing spat the object out and immediately turned toward the others.

"I need something to heal this wound!" she exclaimed. Flamepaw watched as she glanced around furiously. Then, the calico she-cat's eyes fell on a patch of yellow flowers, and she shouted, "Yes!"

"Marigold?" Flamepaw wondered, remembering how she had been forced to fetch it for Goldstar and Snowheart's wounds.

"No," Mothwing sighed, approaching the flowers. "It would be nice though. I guess tormentil will have to do." Leaning down toward the flowers, she pulled out a few and ripped the roots off. Meanwhile, Lupin was still sighing in pain.

Mothwing began chewing up the roots. Both Flamepaw and Barkpaw watched in curiosity. It always amazed Flamepaw how Mothwing worked so diligently as a medicine cat.

Why had I once desired for her to become a warrior with me?

she thought, watching Mothwing work.

As soon as the roots were chewed up, Mothwing came back over to Lupin. Slowly, she began applying the paste to his wound, spreading it very carefully. Flamepaw watched as Lupin winced as Mothwing applied the remedy. He let out a low growl.

Flamepaw froze, suddenly frightened Lupin would lash out at Mothwing and attack her. But his growl immediately faded, and she relaxed again. Still, she wondered if hanging with these foxes and dogs truly was the best choice...

The medicine cat had hesitated a bit at Lupin's unexpected growl, but she finished her work, stepping away and grinning slightly.

"There," she announced. "Now all I need is something to cover this." She paused and thought for a moment. "Like cobweb."

Flamepaw watched as the calico sighed and lowered her head, shaking it slowly. "Now would be the time for that to fall out of the sky."

Lupin growled, obviously still in pain.

"Oh, hush," Mothwing snapped at him. Flamepaw was taken aback at Mothwing's ability to talk to the wolf with such authority. He could easily break her neck in a heartbeat.

"Let's see," Mothwing spoke, beginning to pace back and forth. "They are usually found in small places, preferably in nooks and crannies. Oh, I better go get some!"

Flamepaw, seeing an opportunity to help, stepped forward.

"I can help you find some, Mothwing."

"That would be lovely, Flamepaw. Thank you," she replied.

Barkpaw placed his tail on Flamepaw's shoulder.

"Are you sure you want to be alone out there?" he asked. "It

seems Swampstar is after Mothwing, and if they find you..." His eyes shone with deep concern.

"I'll be fine," Flamepaw assured him. "You can stay here and watch the others. Will you stay safe here too?"

"I will," Barkpaw promised. "Please be safe. I know Mothwing is a very good medicine cat, but if anything happened to you."

"I'll be back before you know it," Flamepaw told him, nuzzling him slightly. He let out a low purr, and then she broke away.

"See you soon," she promised, bounding away with Mothwing deeper into the forest.

Chapter 14

As Flamepaw lingered deeper in the woods beside Mothwing, she couldn't help but glance back. The others were no longer in her view, but she worried for them, especially Barkpaw. What if the hunters returned? What if something happened to him? Flamepaw's heart seized with fear.

She supposed Barkpaw was having the very same thoughts. Perhaps they were both overrreacting. He did, however, respect her relationship with Mothwing by not coming with them, and besides, Flamepaw would find it nice to spend some time with her friend, especially after all that had happened.

The cruel fate of RiverClan occupied her every thoughts, and she felt her stomach growing queasy. How could something that terrible have happened? And how was it that Barkpaw and Flamepaw missed falling into the same fate?

Flamepaw let out a deep sigh as she passed by the familiar scented pine trees. Her stomach growled a bit, and she realized she had not eaten in awhile. Though she longed for a nice fish, she found that she didn't really long to eat, not after all that she'd heard.

"I know. It is hard to understand," Mothwing replied a few moments after Flamepaw's sigh had disappeared.

Flamepaw bolted upright, unaware Mothwing had heard her sighing.

Of course Mothwing must know I'd be concerned, she told herself. *I'm sure the same thoughts are going through Mothwing's head.*

"I hope StarClan will save RiverClan," Mothwing continued as she scanned around for any small nooks and crannies.

"Me too," Flamepaw whimpered.

"I am impressed you've made it so far on your own," Mothwing admitted.

"I couldn't have done it without Barkpaw," Flamepaw honestly replied. Though Mothwing's comment stung a bit, she knew that Mothwing meant no harm. Flamepaw was merely a RiverClan apprentice, and the fact that she and Barkpaw had made it out of RiverClan borders, joined a group of cats, and survived an attack by hunters was simply shocking.

Mothwing grinned a little.

"And how are things between you and Barkpaw?" she asked.

Flamepaw felt herself turning away and blushing. She then glanced back at her friend, the calico's gentle smile calming her.

"I think we are a bit more than friends now," she confessed.

"Oh? Is that so?" Mothwing asked happily.

Flamepaw nodded.

"It-it was hard those first few sunrises without RiverClan, and Barkpaw and I grew very close. And I suddenly realized my feelings for him and his for me, and well, we love each other, Mothwing, very much," Flamepaw explained.

Mothwing smiled widely. "I'm happy for you, Flamepaw. Are you mates?"

Flamepaw's eyes widened. "Oh, no! We're merely apprentices! And we're busy with this RiverClan business! There is no time to—"

"You are nearly twelve moons," Mothwing reminded her.

Flamepaw sighed, knowing this was true. But RiverClan was gone, and there was no cat to give her and Barkpaw their warrior names.

"I wish for Goldstar to give us our warrior names though,"

Flamepaw confessed quietly.

"I understand," Mothwing replied. "I'm pleased that you've found a tom who cares about you."

Flamepaw smiled weakly, thinking back to her first crush on Spotteddusk, or Neko at the time. She was glad she had not continued to love him from afar knowing he'd never look her way. She was glad Barkpaw had stumbled out of the bushes that day.

"I wish you could be in love and have a mate," Flamepaw told Mothwing.

Mothwing smiled and let out a sigh. "But that is not the life I have chosen, and I have never desired it. During my training I thought of it, wondering if I would meet a tom and later regret it, but I love my work, and I enjoy teaching my skills onto others."

"That reminds me," Flamepaw said. "What happened to Spotpaw?"

Mothwing looked away.

"She is still in SwampClan," she explained. "As is everyone else. I thought that if I could escape, I could go get help, but you are the only ones I have found. But don't worry. We'll save the clan together."

"Agreed," Flamepaw replied.

"Hey, look! There are some tight places!" Mothwing exclaimed, pointing her speckled tail to some clumps of branches and rocks.

"Perfect!" Flamepaw mewed. She followed her medicine cat friend over to the spot and began inspecting the small cracks for any signs of cobwebs. Almost immediately, she caught sight of the wiry and shiny substance.

"Found some!" she announced.

"Good! Go ahead and collect it! I'll search over here,"

Mothwing told her, trotting away from her.

Flamepaw collected the cobwebs from nearby branches, setting them down on the forest floor in order to make a pile. She worked diligently for awhile, Mothwing doing the same. Normally, they would not have to use so many cobwebs, but Lupin was a large animal, and his wound was nearly twice the size of that of a cat.

When Flamepaw thought she had made a sufficient pile, she called Mothwing over to inspect. The calico dropped her work and padded over, glancing at the pile of cobwebs.

"Nice job, Flamepaw," she told her.

Flamepaw grinned, glad she had been able to help.

"Should we head back now?" Flamepaw asked.

"In a bit," Mothwing decided. She padded back over to where she had been collecting and grabbed the last string of cobwebs. Then, grabbing the pile in her mouth, she went and placed them on top of Flamepaw's, creating a large pile of cobwebs to treat Lupin's wounds.

Oh, Lupin will feel so much better after this! Flamepaw thought in an excited manner. She truly was grateful that the wolf had saved all their lives.

"Now are we ready?" Flamepaw asked.

"I wondered if you had any questions for me," Mothwing spoke.

Flamepaw tilted her head. "About what?"

"SwampClan," Mothwing replied. "It might be a bit unfair to not include Barkpaw in this conversation, but he was not born in RiverClan and did not grow up in it like you and I did. Besides, it will be hard to discuss RiverClan's state with the others. Dusty and Tigerstripe are not part of RiverClan, nor are those wolves and dogs."

"What—what was it like?" Flamepaw asked, a bit afraid to hear the response.

"We were marched out of camp in the middle of the night with SwampClan warriors surrounding us," Mothwing began. "Of course many cats tried to escape, but they were quickly silenced by Swampstar. Many were injured after trying to rebel, and a few even died, but they continued leading us on our way.

"When we arrived at SwampClan, we were told that we would be treated as equal SwampClan members, but we were very wrong. The clan was set up as any camp was. There was a standard nursery, medicine cat den, warriors' den, and so forth. I was placed in the position of a medicine cat, Spotpaw joining me.

"We did not experience as much pain as the others did, but we witnessed it. Again, many tried to rebel, and those cats were quickly given warnings and then executed if they did not obey. Swampstar forced them to hunt and patrol day and night, driving the others to exhaustion. Even the kits were not allowed to play outside the nursery, and especially not with the other SwampClan kits.

"We were a minority and were treated like it. I often treated the wounds of those who had attempted to rebel against SwampClan cats. Their wounds were nasty, the worst wounds I've ever seen. And the training Swampstar was putting them through was unbearable. He plans to attack with a large army, and he needed to make sure all cats were properly trained."

Flamepaw froze. "You said cats were killed. My parents? Rosepettle? Spotteddusk? Goldstar?!"

"All are still alive," Mothwing assured her. "Unhurt, I am not sure. But you must thank StarClan you were able to escape from their grasp. Never in my life have I seen my fellow warriors taken advantage of like that. I was lucky for once being a medicine cat. I didn't have to undergo training because Swampstar told me I would be essential in battle for healing his warriors.

"They didn't see me as much of a threat either, which made

it easier to escape. Though I am a medicine cat, I still received some warrior training for protection purposes. I just hope we can find some other cats, Flamepaw, and try to stop them," Mothwing explained, sighing.

"Maybe Dusty and Tigerstripe will join," Flamepaw suggested. "I could talk to them..."

"We will discuss it later," Mothwing assured her. "But for now, let's head back. It's beginning to get late, and I don't want Lupin to suffer much longer."

And I don't want to worry Barkpaw, Flamepaw thought.

Grabbing her share of cobwebs, the two began the journey back to the others together, though Flamepaw felt horrific as if she'd be sick. She could not believe what RiverClan was going through.

Chapter 15

As Flamepaw and Mothwing made their way back to the others with their cobwebs, Flamepaw noticed the sky beginning to turn orange up ahead, signaling the end of another day. And what a long day it had been. This morning Krait had been alive and Flamepaw had no notion of where RiverClan was.

Now, Krait was dead, Mothwing had found them, a wolf had saved their lives, and they were all recovering from their encounter with the twoleg hunters. Flamepaw wasn't sure she'd ever had so much excitement in one day before, not even on her quest to find Goldstar.

Flamepaw sighed as she thought about her leader. Was she scared now? Or was she fearless like Flamepaw had always pictured her?

I hope we get back to everyone soon, Flamepaw thought as she trotted alongside Mothwing, delicately holding the cobwebs in her jaws. She then began to long for her mother, her father, Rosepettle, Spotteddusk, and even Snowheart.

Please don't let them suffer a terrible fate, Flamepaw thought. While Krait came to her mind, she began to think of Daisyflower again and Clawkit, and soon, Korosu's red eyes had slipped back into her mind.

Flamepaw quickly shook these thoughts away, not wanting to fall into the same spiraling nightmare she had entered after returning from the quest. Right now it would be up to her, Mothwing, and Barkpaw to save RiverClan, and though it would be difficult, Flamepaw knew StarClan would aid them.

"I hope the others aren't worrying about us," Mothwing spoke at last, glancing around. The sun was setting more rapidly now, and Flamepaw too feared that Barkpaw might be distressed

over them.

When Flamepaw did not reply, Mothwing continued.

"We set out quite awhile ago. I hope that poor wolf is okay and his new pups," she said.

Flamepaw nodded. "Lupin should be fine. He's a strong wolf."

This, she was unsure, as she'd only met the wolf that day, but he seemed to be in good health and acted very strong and tenacious. Surely that meant he was recovering well.

"Mothwing, how will we help RiverClan?" Flamepaw asked after a few more moments of silence. Mothwing was quiet for a few moments, the only sound escaping from her the quiet footsteps on the earth.

"I am not sure exactly," she admitted, "but we'll find a way. I understand SwampClan well and know its location. We'll figure something out."

Flamepaw nodded, though fear still shook her. She didn't want to lose the clan she'd grown up in or the cats she had grown to love. She would've given anything to be back in RiverClan living life as a normal apprentice who worked and trained hard with her mentor.

But I am no longer a normal apprentice. I never was, she thought to herself. If the quest to find Goldstar had not taken away her ordinary life, then this experience surely would. She realized she had very few memories of just living in a normal clan and experiencing normal clan life.

As they continued their walk, Flamepaw began to pick up the scent of the others, and she sighed in relief, glad nothing had happened during their separation. It seemed that Mothwing had picked up the scent too, and she fearlessly led the way.

The sun had nearly set now, the orange and pink sky fading into one of indigo blue. Flamepaw quickened her pace, anxious to

see the others while Mothwing attempted to follow her, quickly trotting behind.

Before she could even make it past the bushes toward the little clearing where the others were staying, the bushes rattled, and something leapt out. Flamepaw yelped in surprise and dropped her cobwebs, her heart beating rapidly.

As soon as the cobwebs hit the floor, however, Flamepaw sighed in relief. Standing in front of her was Barkpaw, who looked as bewildered as her.

"Flamepaw! What's wrong?!" came Mothwing's shout. She appeared but a few seconds behind, her eyes fierce and widened in surprise. Upon seeing Barkpaw, however, she grinned, and her muscles relaxed.

"Oh, it's just you, Barkpaw," she observed.

"Sorry to scare you," Barkpaw told Flamepaw as she bent down to retrieve the fallen cobwebs.

"I was worried about you. I didn't know when you were getting back," he explained.

"We're fine," Flamepaw assured him. "Just took a little bit to grab the cobwebs is all."

"Flamepaw is a very good cobweb seeker," Mothwing explained, patting Flamepaw on the back with her speckled tail.

Flamepaw smiled weakly.

"Any trouble?" Barkpaw asked.

Mothwing shook her head. "We were perfectly fine. Is everything okay here?"

"Fine," Barkpaw responded. "Come on. Let's get Lupin some more help now."

Barkpaw led the two through the bushes and into the

clearing where the others were. Flamepaw turned, seeing that Lupin was fast asleep, his chest slowly falling up and down. Breeze was curled up beside him, all her pups sleeping soundly as well.

"Finally!" yipped Holly. She and her sister were still awake, and they were gazing at the three cats.

Her squeak awoke Lupin, and he opened his eyes, slowly focusing on the medicine cat.

"Oh, you're back," he grumbled.

"Let's get these cobwebs on your wounds," Mothwing said, grabbing some cobwebs and padding over toward the wolf. Mothwing slowly began sorting through the cobwebs, and Lupin growled. Obviously he still wasn't free from all pain.

"Just help me!" he growled.

"Well, sorry," Mothwing muttered. "I didn't realize you were in such a hurry—"

"Just do it!" Lupin snapped.

Mothwing sighed and began to apply the cobwebs toward Lupin's wounds. Flamepaw watched with Barkpaw, noticing as the wolf would wince slightly, then sigh. Mothwing used up nearly all of the cobwebs in the process, and Flamepaw watched with curiosity how delicate the she-cat was in fixing his wounds. She had never seen the she-cat perform such a tedious task before.

Finally, Mothwing stepped away from the wolf, and he sighed in relief, resting his head back down.

"There you go," Mothwing told him. "But don't think you're going anywhere soon. Rest is necessary for your recovery."

Lupin growled in annoyance.

"Not a budge from you!" Mothwing warned him. "It would only make you less weak."

Lupin growled once again and then let out a sigh in defeat.

"All right. I'll behave," he promised.

"Good," Mothwing said. She turned to Flamepaw and Barkpaw and grinned.

"I don't know about you two, but I'm exhausted. We should hit the hay," she suggested.

"Agreed," Barkpaw replied.

Mothwing glanced around for a moment, then froze. "Say, weren't there two other cats with you?" she asked.

"Yeah, Dusty and Tigerstripe," Flamepaw said. She spun around, then gasped in surprise. Both of the toms were gone, leaving not a trace behind them.

"Oh no," Barkpaw muttered.

"Barkpaw, where did they go?" Flamepaw exclaimed.

"I-I don't know," Barkpaw stammered. "I was busy out looking for you two. I didn't even hear them leave."

"Lupin, did you see them leave?" Flamepaw asked.

The wolf shook his head. "We were all asleep and resting."

"Rose? Holly?" Flamepaw questioned.

The pups both shrunk down.

"Do you know where they are?"

It was Rose who spoke up.

"We heard something moving in the bushes though we weren't sure what it was. Then, Tigerstripe pricked his ears and started calling out 'rain,' but it wasn't raining at all! Dusty chased after him, and we haven't seen them since," Rose confessed.

"So they weren't ditching us," Flamepaw said, relieved for a moment. Still, it was almost completely dark now, and they still had not returned.

"It doesn't sound like they were planning to leave forever. Maybe they'll be back soon," Mothwing proposed.

At that moment, movement came from the bushes, and Tigerstripe and Dusty emerged, a small red fox kit behind them.

"A fox!" Flamepaw shrieked, horrid memories flashing through her head. "Hurry, let's attack now!"

"Woah, wait!" Tigerstripe snapped, causing Flamepaw to remain still. He had never spoken in such a harsh manner before.

"Tigerstripe, that's a fox," Barkpaw said.

"I am aware of what she is. This is Rain," he announced.

"You...know her?" Flamepaw asked.

"Yes," Tigerstripe replied. "It's strange, I know, but we've been close friends since she was a small fox kit. She's grown a bit, I guess. She's completely harmless, I assure you."

"Nice to meet you," Rain said, dipping her head.

Flamepaw was shocked that the fox was speaking in perfect cat tongue. She slowly dipped her head in response, still not sure if this was a dream or not.

"I'm going to bed," she said. "We'll...figure this out tomorrow."

"Good. I'm exhausted," Dusty exclaimed, letting out a large yawn.

Flamepaw curled up beside Barkpaw, at first believing that all these events would cause her to stay awake with millions of thoughts running through her mind. But as soon as her head hit her paws, she found herself slowly sinking into a deep sleep.

Chapter 16

Morning came quickly, and Flamepaw soon found sunlight streaming through the forest. She slowly opened her eyes, watching as the others were also slowly waking. Tigerstripe and Rain were curled together, which Flamepaw found odd. She would never have expected a cat to be so close with a fox. Tigerstripe's eyes opened a second later, and beside him, Dusty let out a large yawn.

Flamepaw turned her gaze to the wolves and dogs, watching as Breeze was slowly awakened by the whimpering of her newborn pups. Rose and Holly were still fast asleep, but Lupin had awoke now, and he smiled warmly at Breeze.

Flamepaw gently nudged Barkpaw, watching as his eyes slowly opened.

"Morning, sleepyhead," she purred.

"Five more minutes," Barkpaw grumbled, resting his head back down on his paws.

Suddenly, Rain jerked awake, her eyes wild. She was breathing heavily, and Flamepaw jumped in surprise. What had spooked the fox?

"Are you okay?" Tigerstripe asked Rain, also clearly taken aback.

The fox blinked quickly and then glanced back at the ground, slowly relaxing.

"Yes, of course," she assured him, her breaths becoming more stable now and no longer as rapid. "It was just a ye—nightmare."

"Okay then," Tigerstripe replied oddly. Flamepaw felt a bit awkward too, not sure whether or not the fox could be trusted.

Barkpaw was finally able to keep his eyes open by this point, and Mothwing had also stirred and had begun to carefully inspect

Lupin's wounds. As all the animals slowly woke and greeted the new day, Lupin spoke up.

"I'm not sure it's safe for all of us to be out in the open," he explained. "We should find some real shelter, just in case the hunters return. We can transport the pups there."

"But you're still weak," Flamepaw told him, his wounds clearly contrasting with his fur. "We need to wait until you heal."

Mothwing sat up and stared at Lupin. "Not a budge from you!" she warned. "It would only make you less weak!"

Lupin shrunk back down, clearly disappointed.

"Flamepaw and Mothwing are right, dear," Breeze replied, licking her mate's ear. "You're still too weak, and the pups are far too young. If we haven't been bothered by now, I don't think we will be again."

"Do you hear something?" Rain suddenly interrupted, pricking her ears.

Flamepaw froze, wondering if Breeze had just jinxed what she had said to Lupin. She pricked her ears with the other cats but heard no sound.

"I don't hear anything," Tigerstripe told her.

Rain was beginning to look as frightened as she had when she first awoke, and she shrunk down, murmuring quietly, "Are you really sure?"

"No one hears anything, do they?" Flamepaw asked.

All of the others nodded, trying to calm the worried fox.

Dusty shrugged and turned toward Rain. "It must just be in your head."

Rain nodded, though she still held a worried gaze. "Yes, I suppo—"

"Well, good afternoon," came a sweet voice.

Flamepaw leapt up, frightened by whatever had spoken. Rain spun around, looking for where the sound had come from, and Dusty immediately did the same.

"Up here, silly," came the voice again. It was somewhat familiar to Flamepaw, and with each word spoken, her fur prickled.

Flamepaw slowly lifted her gaze to find a sleek white she-cat laying regally on a branch, picking at a leaf. Her blood red eyes shot down on the other cats, and she grinned maliciously.

Flamepaw froze, wanting to cry out in terror. Barkpaw was about to ask what was wrong when he caught sight of the she-cat and froze too. She was too frightened to say a word.

"Um, hi?" Tigerstripe asked.

Perhaps it's not her, Flamepaw told herself, though she knew she could not lie to herself.

The she-cat then turned her gaze on Flamepaw and stared at her intensely.

"Say, I know you," she purred. She leapt down from the tree and landed on the ground. Flamepaw felt her heart beating more rapidly with each approaching step. The she-cat stopped in front of her and snickered, "Do you remember me?"

Flamepaw unsheathed her claws and spat, "Korosu!"

"Koro-what?" Dusty asked, clearly confused.

Korosu flicked her long feathered tail at Flamepaw's sharp unsheathed claws.

"Settle down, kitty. I have worse things to worry about," she told her.

"LEAVE ME ALONE!" Flamepaw hissed, refusing to sheathe her claws.

"Don't get your tail in a twist, honey," Korosu purred. Though her voice was calm, the tone frightened Flamepaw and left her with an overall weird feeling.

"I am not going to hurt you," she told Flamepaw. "But your clan kitties are not in such a good situation at this time."

"You always hurt my friends, Korosu!" Flamepaw snapped. "And it won't happen this time!"

She was not sure how she'd gotten up so much courage to confront Korosu in this manner, but just the thought of Clawkit's limp body filled her with incredible anger and a longing for revenge.

"Fine. Have it your way," Korosu hissed quietly. "Let your friends be killed if you don't think I would let you know where you are." Turning away from Flamepaw, she instead turned toward Tigerstripe. "And you, dear, you can keep looking for your precious little Jetfur, but you have no idea what I know." She then sat down and curled her tail around her body.

"How do you know about Jetfur?" Tigerstripe hissed.

Flamepaw glared at Korosu.

"What do you know that's so special?" she wondered.

"Five, four, three." Korosu appeared to be counting down to something. "Two...One." All of them glanced around, expecting something to happen, but nothing did. "If you want to know where your heart's desire is, then follow me. Take it or leave it."

"What do you mean by my heart's desire?" Flamepaw asked.

"I know where your river cats are," she told Flamepaw. Then she turned to Tigerstripe and grinned at him with the same malicious smile. "And Jetfur."

"I already know where my clan is!" Flamepaw spat. "You're not fooling me!"

Tigerstripe's ears, however, pricked up.

"You know where Jetfur is? I'm coming!" he exclaimed.

Flamepaw stared at Tigerstripe in disbelief. "What are you doing?" she gasped. "Don't trust her!"
Tigerstripe glanced at Flamepaw, his eyes shining with pain. Finding Jetfur must've meant a lot to him if he was willing to risk everything on one cat's claim.

"But what if she's not lying?" he said quietly. He then glanced back up at the she-cat. "I'm coming, Korosu."

Korosu grinned and then turned back to Flamepaw. "No, you don't know where your clan cats are, silly kitty."

"I do! I know where Swampstar's clan is!" Mothwing spat back at Korosu.

"Oh, they're not there right now," Korosu explained. "I thought you'd be concerned about how many cats are dying. And your leader, of course." Her face then took on one of fake shock, and she said loudly, "Oops! Cat's out of the bag!"

Though her words stung, Flamepaw knew she couldn't trust Korosu, even if she was telling the truth.

"I'll find my way without you!" Flamepaw hissed.

"Where's Jetfur?" asked Tigerstripe, jumping with excitement.

"Follow," Korosu told Tigerstripe, and she took off running. Tigerstripe hesitated for a moment then took off after her, Rain following behind.

"Rain, where are you going?!" Dusty shouted.

"I want to follow Tigerstripe!" she called.

And within moments, Korosu, Tigerstripe, and Rain had faded from their view. Flamepaw sat down in disbelief, wondering what had happened over the past few minutes.

"What if she's not lying?" Dusty whispered.

Lupin shrugged. "I'd rather attack that she-cat anyway. I would've ripped her throat out if it weren't for my condition."

Flamepaw was still startled, and it took the rest of the day for Barkpaw and Mothwing to calm her down. No matter how hard she tried, she could not free those blood red eyes from her mind, and Korosu's words haunted her still. What if cats truly were dying? What if RiverClan was in more danger than Mothwing had described.

By mid-afternoon, all were relaxing and trying to recover from the haunting experience of the morning. Flamepaw was laying down in the sun, trying to clear her mind, when she noticed Dusty staring off into the distance intensely.

"Are you okay?" Flamepaw asked Dusty quietly.

Dusty looked up. "Oh, yes," he assured her. Then he stared at Flamepaw some more. "You're still an apprentice?"

Barkpaw, hearing the conversation, got up and moved next to Flamepaw, listening to Flamepaw she replied to Dusty's question.

"Unfortunate, huh? We really should be warriors, but our clan went missing, and no one was around to name us," Flamepaw explained.

"Oh...that's too bad," Dusty said, sighing. "You know, I was a warrior once."

"You were?" Flamepaw asked.

Dusty nodded. "Clan life just wasn't for me though. And my mate lived a life as a rogue, so I had to choose one."

"I've been a rogue for awhile now," Flamepaw sighed. "It seems my clan likes to disappear a lot."
"I wonder how that Tigerstripe is getting along now," Dusty thought.

"Me too," Flamepaw said, wondering if Korosu really was leading him to Jetfur or not.

Soon, the day melted into night, and Flamepaw curled up next to Barkpaw, hoping his presence would rid the nightmares of Korosu from her mind.

Chapter 17

As dangerous and exciting had the day been before, Flamepaw found the night, in contrast, to be rather peaceful. As soon as she'd gone to bed, she'd already imagined she'd have nightmares about Korosu and what was happening to her clan.

But upon falling asleep, she found that nothing haunted her. In fact, she barely had any dreams at all. As she slept, she dreamt of nothing but blackness and quiet. She was thrilled to have slept like this as it had been difficult to sleep for moons with RiverClan's disappearance haunting her each night.

Barkpaw was curled up beside her, his tail wrapped around her body. She purred as she felt his warmth against her and snuggled closer against him, thankful for his loving presence. Mothwing slept not far from them. She too was also curled up and slept peacefully.

Dusty was but a few nests down, and though he appeared to be sleeping, Flamepaw could sense him tossing and turning, his mind probably focused on his dead mate and missing kits. Flamepaw's heart sank at the sir of him.

Rose and Holly were barely visible against the night sky, but she could see the falling and rising of chests of the two dark figures. Lupin and Breeze were also curled up beside each other with the pups sleeping soundly as well, an occasional whimper echoing through their mouths.

As Flamepaw drifted in and out of sleep, she would glance up at the night sky where all the beautiful stars twinkled. She wondered if perhaps StarClan was looking down on her and offering her guidance. She quietly sighed, hoping a miracle would come soon.

All around her, crickets chirped, frogs croaked, and wildlife filled the nighttime air. She was vaguely reminded of sleeping in her nest back in the RiverClan apprentice den, and this thought began to lull her back to sleep.

Flamepaw slowly closed her eyes, ready to return to her dreamless sleep, free from all distractions, when the snapping of a twig jolted her back awake. She glanced around but found nothing, and she hesitantly rested her head back on her paws.

Glancing forward, she noticed the noise had woken Mothwing too, and now the calico she-cat seemed to be wide awake and vigilant. Calmed by Mothwing being awake and watchful, Flamepaw began to close her eyes again.

This time, another sound of a twig being cracked and a harsh whisper jolted her awake once more. Both Flamepaw and Mothwing glanced around and for a moment made eye contact before deciding that perhaps it was only a rabbit wandering around at night.

Still, Flamepaw feared that Korosu or perhaps the hunters would burst through those bushes and end their lives for good.

"MOTHWING!" came the whisper again, this time more audible.

Flamepaw watched as Mothwing jolted upright, shocked. She caught Flamepaw's gaze again and after a moment of silence, shook her head as if she were going crazy. Flamepaw wondered if perhaps she was going crazy too, and she revolved to attempting to fall back asleep again.

Another twig cracked, closer this time, and Flamepaw now sat up, knowing that something was lurking nearby. And judging by the fact this being knew Mothwing's name, it must be an unfriendly cat from the past.

Suddenly, something came through the bushes. Flamepaw held her breath, ready to screech and wake the others, when she recognized the golden pelt of the cat. Both she and Mothwing gazed at each other in shock, then turned back to the she-cat.

There was Goldstar, standing right in front of them. Flamepaw couldn't believe how different she looked. Her muzzle held traces of gray, her posture was not as firm, her limbs looked weak, and scratches covered her body. Her eyes, while they still glowed, seemed to have dimmed, and she looked as if she'd aged many

moons in the time RiverClan had been gone.

"G-G-Goldstar?" Mothwing stuttered. Flamepaw was too shocked to even speak. She glanced around at the sleeping animals around her but found they were all still sound asleep.

"Shh," Goldstar hissed. "You'll lure them here."

"Goldstar," was all Flamepaw managed to say, a little bit too loudly.

"No!" Goldstar exclaimed.

Flamepaw glanced around, wondering what she'd done wrong, when a dog, a mutt of some sort, burst out of the bushes. Goldstar let out a yowl and began running around in a panic as the dog chased after her.

The barks immediately woke the others sleeping, and Flamepaw watched as Lupin lazily lifted his head and murmured, "What the?" as his gaze fell on the dog chasing Goldstar.

Goldstar yowled once more and scrambled up a nearby tree. The dog's mouth nearly caught onto her tail as she quickly found a high branch. The dog continued to remain staring up set the tree, his forelegs rested on the trunk. He whipped his tail back and forth eagerly, seeming like he wanted to play with rather than harm the feline.

"Don't hurt her!" Mothwing hissed at the dog.

The dog placed his legs back on the ground and happily turned his gaze on Mothwing.

"I just wanted to play!" he exclaimed. He glanced around at the others, and then his eyes fell on Lupin.

"Oh, hey, Lupin," he said casually.

Flamepaw watched as Lupin's eyes widened.

"Seven?!" he exclaimed.

Flamepaw recalled how Breeze had named one of her pups Seven, but she had not known the pup was named after someone else.

"That's what they call me. Don't wear it out," Seven yipped. Goldstar, meanwhile, was still in the tree, shaking with fear.

"But you were dead!" Lupin cried out.

"Oh, yeah, that's what I thought too," Seven continued.

Flamepaw and the others glanced around confused, waiting for some sort of explanation.

"I must be crazy," Lupin muttered. "I'm going back to sleep."

"Well, it turns out there are two kinds of bullets," Seven explained, scooting closer to Lupin. "One puts you into a deep sleep, and when you wake up, you wonder what the heck happened. The other, well, you don't wake up at all. Two-legs can be so melodramatic."

Suddenly it made sense to Flamepaw. She recalled seeing more than one dog fleeing with the wolves, and she supposed that Seven had been shot and presumed to be dead when the hunters attacked.

Lupin cleared his throat and then spoke up. "Well, this is a bit awkward. I named one of my sons after you."

Seven's face took on one of sheer joy. "Really? Where is he?" He sprang over to Breeze's pups in excitement.

"This one here," Breeze said warmly, pointing to the young pup.

Seven at first nervously sniffed the puppy and then wagged his tail, nuzzling the pup affectionately.

"Hey, Seven Jr.! It's your uncle Seven!" he exclaimed.

His words managed to wake up the young pup, and when the pup woke up, his eyes opened for the first time as well.

"Woohoo! His eyes opened!" he exclaimed. He turned toward Lupin in excitement. "What are the others called?"

As Breeze happily introduced the other pups, Flamepaw watched as Goldstar slowly crept down the tree, no longer afraid. Catching Flamepaw's eye, she motioned the RiverClan cats toward her. Flamepaw, Barkpaw, and Mothwing quickly came to her side.

"Goldstar, what's going on?" Flamepaw asked.

"What's happened since I've left?" Mothwing asked, horrified.

"Things are not good back in...SwampClan, I should say," Goldstar began. "Swampstar is planning to attack the clans living in the forest nearby tomorrow, and he plans to either win or die trying."

Flamepaw let out a small whimper.

"How are our clanmates?" Barkpaw asked nervously.

"Not well. Some have been killed, many are injured, and many are fatigued. I do not think many will survive the battle," Goldstar continued.

"But why have you come here, Goldstar? How did you escape and find us?" Mothwing asked quietly.

"With so much going on with the battle, diversion is easy. No cats have come after you, Mothwing, for the battle is too important, and so it was easy to follow your scent. I did not expect to find my two apprentices here either. I assumed they'd perished long ago."

"We've been trying to find RiverClan for moons!" Barkpaw exclaimed.

"We only met Mothwing a few days ago," Flamepaw added.

"Goldstar, what can we do?" Mothwing asked in a serious manner. "You must have some plan to rescue RiverClan from this battle. We're all willing to help!"

But Goldstar only remained quiet and lowered her head. Flamepaw immediately felt her heart seize with fear and knew at once she had no hope.

"RiverClan is finished," Goldstar confessed. "We will die in that battle tomorrow, and there is nothing that can be done to stop it. I have tried my best to continue leading my clanmates through these difficult times, but we've all lost hope. Too many have died, and even if we do win tomorrow, Swampstar will not let us go. We have no chance of escaping. RiverClan is doomed."

"But you mustn't give up!" Flamepaw shouted, frustrated. How could the leader she had looked up to for so long give up at the first moment? "RiverClan is strong and brave! We can defeat Swampstar and claim our freedom!"

"Flamepaw, you don't know these cats," Goldstar replied. "Though I appreciate your courage."

"Goldstar's right, Flamepaw. Swampstar is more capable than you think," Mothwing added.

"Oh, so now you're siding with her?" Flamepaw asked, annoyed.

"No," Mothwing snapped. She then turned her gaze back to Goldstar. "Goldstar, there's nothing we can't do? Let us come back with you. There must be something."

"No, you must stay. At least you'll all be free from Swampstar. Please heed my advice and do nothing. Find another clan to live in if you must. RiverClan is over," Goldstar said once again. And with these words, she took off.

"Where are you going?!" Mothwing explained.

"Back to my clan!" Goldstar shouted as she disappeared. "If they die, I must die with them!" And with that, she was gone, leaving all three in shock.

"We didn't even get to ask for our warriors names," Flamepaw murmured sadly.

Chapter 18

"GOLDSTAR, NO! COME BACK!" Flamepaw shouted, rushing into the bushes after her leader. Without thinking, she immediately took off and left the others behind, trying to find where the golden she-cat had gone.

"Flamepaw, wait!" came Mothwing's shout, but Flamepaw refused to look back. She just had to find Goldstar. How could her leader reveal such terrible things and just run off so simply? No, she wouldn't allow Goldstar to become a coward.

Flamepaw frantically sniffed for her scent but found it had already disappeared with the evening wind. She frantically looked around, trying to see if Goldstar was nearby. But nothing made a sound, and there was no scent of the leader in the air.

"GOLDSTAR!" she shouted in frustration, glancing around some more. "COME BACK HERE RIGHT NOW OR I'LL—I'LL..." Her voice trailed off as her jaw began to quiver. Tears formed in her eyes, and she sat down in defeat.

Flamepaw let out a startling gasp as tears took ahold of her, and she glanced down at her paws as she silently cried. It just wasn't fair at all. She'd come so far to save her clan, and now her leader was advising them to move on with their lives and just forget about RiverClan. It just wasn't fair...

"Flamepaw, Flamepaw!" came Barkpaw's call now. She heard some bushes rattle nearby, yet she neglected to respond. After a few moments, she heard him burst through the bushes and pause when he found her sitting there.

"Oh, Flamepaw," he mewed sympathetically.

Flamepaw turned around and caught a quick glance of Barkpaw before turning her gaze back to the ground. She tried to quiet her

tears, but they were coming so quickly and growing more louder that it could not be stopped.

Barkpaw immediately rushed to her side, his pelt brushing against hers. He took his tail and gently wrapped it around Flamepaw, causing her heart to swell with love. She leaned her head into his broad chest and began to sob more heavily.

"I know, I know," Barkpaw whispered quietly, rubbing his tail up and down her back.
For a while, they just sat there like that, silently comforting each other. When at last Flamepaw could collect herself, she glanced up at Barkpaw and smiled weakly.

"Thanks for finding me," she told him. "I wasn't really going to follow Goldstar, even if I found her."

"I know," Barkpaw replied, glancing down at her lovingly.

"It's just...not fair," Flamepaw mewed.

Barkpaw sighed. "I agree, Flamepaw. We've gone through so much to help the clan, and now we're told in an instant to forget about it."

"Goldstar's a coward," Flamepaw spat angrily.

"We don't know what the situation is like," Barkpaw pointed out. "Goldstar might be very brave for all we know, trying to protect our lives."

"But she's the leader!" Flamepaw hissed. "She should be protecting the clan and helping them, not leaving them to die! Who cares if she's dying with them?! No cats should be dying!"

Barkpaw remained quiet, waiting for Flamepaw to calm down. Her fur slowly fell back to its normal place, and she let out a sigh, sitting back down next to Barkpaw.

"I wish this were all a dream," she whispered.

"Me too," Barkpaw whispered back into her ear.

"But what will we do?" Flamepaw asked. "Where will we go?"

"Do you honestly think we won't put up a fight?" Barkpaw replied. "Mothwing will know what to do. In fact, we should be heading back. We need to talk with her."

Flamepaw frowned and remained sitting.

"What's wrong?" Barkpaw asked.

"Do we have to head back right away? I'm not sure if I'm ready to face the others yet, and it's so peaceful out here with you. Plus, I feel like we never get to spend that much time together anymore...Could we just stay here for the night?" she asked, wondering if she was being a bit selfish.

Barkpaw smiled. "Sure, but I should let Mothwing and the others know where we are. Can you stay here by yourself?"

Flamepaw nodded. "I can gather some moss for nests."

"Perfect," Barkpaw purred. "I'll be back."

He took off into the bushes, leaving Flamepaw to collect some moss from nearby. She slowly formed it into two nests and smiled, her heart pounding with excitement. Tonight, she and Barkpaw would get some peace and quiet, and her mind might be free from everything going on.

She laid down in her nest and watched as Barkpaw returned, grinning happily.

"Does she know we're okay?" Flamepaw asked.

Barkpaw nodded, laying down next to Flamepaw and nuzzling her gently.

"I love you," he whispered, "and I promise things will work out."

"I love you, too," Flamepaw replied, her heart feeling as if it were about to burst. She laid against him and purred, and slowly, they both found sleep.

As soon as morning came, all the anxieties that had haunted her the day before had returned, and Flamepaw awoke with alarm as she realized Goldstar really had taken off and that RiverClan was in dire danger. Barkpaw, meanwhile, still slept soundly, and Flamepaw felt bad about waking him. But she knew it was time to face Mothwing now and discuss what was to be done.

She slowly poked at him with her tail and watched as he lazily opened his eyes.

"Is it morning already?" he murmured.

"Yes," Flamepaw told him. "And we have to go back to the others now."

"Oh, that's right," Barkpaw grumbled, a bit unhappy to get back to business again. He slowly got to his feet and joined Flamepaw, and together, the two walked back to camp, lovingly exchanging glances with each other.

Though it was a new day, Flamepaw had still retained some of the lovesick attitude she'd had the night before. Both of them easily found their way back to the others, where all the others were slowly waking or already awake. It seemed the new dog, Seven, was busy talking to all of Breeze's pups, as well as playing with Rose and Holly. Lupin and Breeze, meanwhile, seemed to be trying to get as much sleep as they could. Dusty, still curled upin a ball, seemed to be doing the same. Mothwing, meanwhile, was up and about, pacing around the clearing where they had spent many sunrises now.

At the sight of Barkpaw and Flamepaw, her eyes lit up, and she bounded to them. "Did you sleep well?" she asked quickly. They both nodded, and then she began to speak once again. "Good, because we need to discuss what is to be done. We can't very well just let things go by after what Goldstar said. I say we go find RiverClan and aid them in battle. It's all we can do," Mothwing proposed.

"So quickly?" Barkpaw asked. "We don't even have an army."

"We don't have time," Flamepaw reminded him. She glanced back at the wolves and dogs but knew it was not right to endanger them by asking them to join in the fight.

Mothwing caught her gaze, and then spoke. "I've already had the same idea, but it isn't fair to them. Lupin has already spared our lives, and it isn't fair to keep asking. I think it's best that we leave them," Mothwing suggested.

Flamepaw nodded, though her heart sunk a little. She had grown to care for the various animals that had stayed with them.

"So, what's the plan?" Barkpaw asked.

"Well, if you're on board, we leave immediately," Mothwing began. "I can retrace my steps back to SwampClan. I'm unsure of where the battle is taking place, but I can surely find out. I have experience there, and I can use the information I've gathered there to help. Perhaps we can even find a way to prevent the battle or find a way to end it. We are stronger than our clanmates currently, so maybe we can do something to slow the battle or end it."

"Like what?" Flamepaw asked.

Mothwing shrugged. "That, I'm unsure. But we could try speaking to the other clans engaged in battle to see if they'll aid. We could cause some ruckus back in their camp. There are lots of things we can do. Anything to buy time, really. If we can delay the battle, maybe we can grow stronger and grow an army."

"I like this plan," Barkpaw said.

"Then it's agreed. We leave now," Mothwing declared.

"You're leaving?" Dusty asked, now apparently awake. All of the others fell silent, their gazes turned on the three RiverClan cats.

"Yes, we're leaving," Flamepaw announced. "Our clan is in trouble, and it's up to us to help them. Dusty, thank you for letting us tag along. I would thank Krait or Tigerstripe, but..." She paused, watching as Dusty'seyes began to fill with tears. Instead, she turned her gaze to Lupin. "And thank you, Lupin, for saving us from those

hunters. We wish you all the best of luck to you and your new family," Flamepaw said.

"Thank you for healing my wounds," Lupin replied, dipping his heads. "Good luck to you and your...clan, is it?"

"Farewell!" Barkpaw called.

The others said their quick good-byes, and soon, Mothwing, Barkpaw, and Flamepaw had left the clearing and had disappeared into the woods, trusting Mothwing now to lead them to theSwampClan camp...

Chapter 19

"So, how exactly are you finding the SwampClan camp?" Barkpaw asked Mothwing as they worked their way through the forest, brushing past leafy bushes and walking under tall trees that stretched high into the sky.

Mothwing held her nose high in the air for a moment, then lowered it back down, turning her gaze toward the brown-striped tom.

"The scent is easy to pick up on, and I'm familiar with the surrounding area. I tried to escape several times, and I did not get extremely far before I ran into you. We should be there in a few sunrises," Mothwing assured him.

"A few sunrises?!" Flamepaw gasped. "Do you have any idea how much trouble RiverClan could be in by that point?"

Mothwing shot her a glare.

"I'm working as best as I can," she told Flamepaw. "I don't remember the exact route, so it'll take some time for me to lead you there."

"But isn't there a shortcut? A quicker way?" Barkpaw asked.

Mothwing let out a low growl. "Perhaps if you two would give me some peace, I could find a shorter way."

This shut both Flamepaw and Barkpaw's mouths, and they quietly trotted behind her, allowing her to lead the way. Flamepaw met Barkpaw's gaze and smiled weakly before turning her gaze back to Mothwing's backside. She sighed, hoping RiverClan wouldn't be in too much trouble by the time they arrived.

"Mothwing, I'm sorry," Flamepaw spoke up at last. "You've been of a lot of help to us, and we haven't really thanked you enough for all the work you've done."

"And we understand it's difficult to find again the clan you were trying to escape," Barkpaw added. "We're sorry."

Mothwing smiled weakly. "Don't be. We're all under a lot of stress and are bound to bicker. It's a lot to take in."

"I wish Goldstar hadn't run off," Flamepaw muttered. "We could've helped her."

"You know Goldstar wouldn't have wanted that," Mothwing replied. "If she found out we were looking to help RiverClan right now, she'd be furious."

"But it seems like such a cowardice move," Barkpaw argued. "She wants us to stay away yet she is giving up on her clan."

Mothwing sighed, and though Flamepaw agreed with Barkpaw, she knew Mothwing would have a better explanation.

"Like I said, you two have not personally witnessed what SwampClan is capable of. While I too think Goldstar is overreacting just a little, she is doing what she believes is best for the clan. And if she can keep a few of her clanmates from that torturous place, well then I suppose she really is trying to protect RiverClan," Mothwing explained.

"I hope my parents are okay," Flamepaw spoke quietly.

"And Rosepettle and Spotteddusk," Barkpaw added.

I wonder how Dusktail is, and Runningblaze and Snowheart, Flamepaw also thought.

"I hope Spotpaw is all right," Mothwing mewed miserably.

Suddenly, something popped into Flamepaw's head, and she remembered her encounter with Troutfin.

"Mothwing, did Troutfin happen to escape?" Flamepaw wondered.

Mothwing froze and spun around to face the two.

"What do you know about Troutfin?" she asked.

"Troutfin came into the RiverClan camp not long after you disappeared," Barkpaw began. "She was extremely agitated and wouldn't tell us anything."

"I never believed Troutfin made a good deputy," Mothwing muttered. "Yes, she managed to escape when Swampstar was leading us to his clan. She had a break-down almost. She was such an organized cat, and when RiverClan came under attack, she faltered and could not function. I think she's too used to things going her way.

"Anyway, she ran off, and Swampstar's cats were about to pursue her when Swampstar decided to let her go. He claimed she'd already lost her mind and wouldn't be of any use. He didn't expect her to go get help either. Goldstar was extremely disappointed," Mothwing finished.

"And she still would be. She ran off quickly," Flamepaw explained. "I wonder where she went."

Mothwing shrugged. "She never returned to SwampClan. Maybe she did go get help, though I doubt it since RiverClan has been in custody for a while. Perhaps she's dead or in another clan. I guess we won't know."

Flamepaw frowned slightly, sad to hear that Troutfin had cracked under the pressure. Though maybe Goldstar choosing her as deputy hadn't been the best idea.

"This scent is so odd," Mothwing muttered as they continued to trot through the forest.

"You are picking up SwampClan scent, right?" Barkpaw asked.

"Yes, but...it's just..." Mothwing paused, trying to find the right words. "When Korosu came not too long ago, there was something familiar about her scent."

"Well, yeah, you've smelled it before," Flamepaw pointed out.

"But, no, it smelled almost like...SwampClan scent. Whatever I'm picking up, it's definitely SwampClan, but there are other traces in it, and it smells like another cat was here too. It's also familiar, but I can't put a name on it."

Flamepaw sniffed the air, trying to pick up the scent that Mothwing was describing. While most of the scent was unfamiliar, there was a murky scent that hung in the air, one that she had smelled not too long ago. She definitely recognized it, though she was unsure which cat it belonged too. Then, it hit her.

"That's Tigerstripe's scent!" she gasped, recognizing the strong odor.

"Tigerstripe...that was that big tom, right?" she asked.

Flamepaw nodded.

"And he went off with Korosu!" Barkpaw gasped.

"Do you believe Korosu is going to SwampClan?" Flamepaw wondered.

"We must be following their scents," Mothwing spoke quietly. "Well, even if they are, it's leading us in the right direction. The forest is becoming much more familiar to me."

"Is Korosu a part of SwampClan?" Flamepaw asked.

"Not that I know of," Mothwing replied. "I never saw her around SwampClan, and I'm sure Swampstar would've mentioned her."

"That's so strange," Barkpaw spoke.

"Well, whatever it is, I'm going to keep following it," Mothwing announced. "It seems to be leading us in the right direction, and I don't want to lose track of it."

"But what if it leads us to Korosu?" Flamepaw wondered.

"Korosu didn't seem to want anything to do with us when we last saw her," Barkpaw assured her. "I don't think she'll care. She's probably busy with Tigerstripe."

"But she could change her mind," Flamepaw replied quietly.

"Listen to you all. We are RiverClan cats, and we can surely take her down," Mothwing argued.

"Ah, yes," Barkpaw replied, laughing slightly. "A medicine cat and two untrained apprentices."

"Don't doubt yourself," Mothwing sneered. "You two have learned more these past moons than you would've ever learned in warrior training. In fact, you two should be warriors by now."

"Don't remind us," Flamepaw muttered miserably, longing for her warrior name. She was sick of being referred to as "Flamepaw."

"Pick up the pace. Maybe we can get there sooner," Mothwing told them.

And so they did, traveling quicker through the forest than they had earlier. Mothwing continued following the scent, and she claimed that the forest was becoming more and more familiar to her with each passing hour.

The sun slowly moved across the sky, and Flamepaw was reminded of her quest to find Goldstar when they would travel all day. It had been moons since that quest now, though the memory was still fresh in her head. She supposed she had more memories outside of RiverClan than inside of RiverClan now.

They would stop occasionally along the way to grab a bite to eat or get a drink of water. Flamepaw was fortunate to catch a robin, which she split with Barkpaw. Mothwing also was fortunate enough to catch herself a mouse. Though she had not received warrior training, Flamepaw was pleased to know she could hunt and fight.

After their short breaks they would continue on their way again. As the sun's shadows moved, Flamepaw grew more and more excited and anxious, wondering if SwampClan would be right around the corner. Mothwing assured her though that the earliest they would make it to SwampClan would be the next afternoon, not that day.

Though this caused Flamepaw's heart to sink, she was thrilled that

they were making better time than expected. Following Korosu and Tigerstripe's scent had turned out to be a blessing from StarClan, and they were led on the right track.

Soon, however, the sun began to sink behind the hillside, and they all decided that it was time to find a place to rest. After a short amount of searching, Mothwing found a cluster of rocks which they could shelter under.

Flamepaw's legs ached from a day's worth of walking, but she was more excited than ever. She did not want to sleep but wanted to continue her mission. She longed to see RiverClan again. Though she argued against sleeping, Mothwing told her it would be necessary for her strength, for there was a chance they might run into SwampClan warriors the following day.

Giving in to Mothwing's wishes, Flamepaw curled down by some rocks, Barkpaw curling up beside her and providing her with warmth. Though it took some time, Flamepaw slowly found herself drifting to sleep, dreaming about saving RiverClan from SwampClan's clutch the following day.

Chapter 20

Sunlight shot into Flamepaw's eyes as she weakly opened them, squinting at the morning sun. Slowly, her eyes became adjusted to the bright light, and she glanced around, seeing that Barkpaw was still curled up beside her, sound asleep. She smiled and licked his ear, glad to have him beside her. He twitched a little but remained sleeping.

She then turned her gaze to where Mothwing had fallen asleep the night before, but she was surprised to see the calico she-cat had vanished. Her heart pounding, Flamepaw immediately stood up, stirring Barkpaw accidentally.

"Huh? Is it morning?" Barkpaw muttered.

Flamepaw ignored him, glancing around for Mothwing. The she-cat's scent was still fresh, though Flamepaw wondered where she could've gone. Had she decided that this mission was too dangerous for them and decided to ditch them? Did she believe the mission was too dangerous? Worried thoughts jumped around in Flamepaw's head.

"You okay?" Barkpaw asked, letting out a large yawn. He stretched and slowly rose to his feet, turning to face her.

"I don't see Mothwing," Flamepaw told him in a panicked manner.

"Relax. She's probably out stretching her legs," Barkpaw assured her. "I'm a bit sore from last night too."

"But what if she's done exactly what Goldstar did?!" Flamepaw exclaimed, turning away to face Barkpaw. "What if she's run off to and left us alone? What if she doesn't care about RiverClan anymore? Why does every cat ditch us?!"

Barkpaw was silent for a moment then glanced past Flamepaw's

shoulder.

"Um," was all he replied.

"What?!" Flamepaw exclaimed, furious to see him acting so calm.

Barkpaw slowly pointed his tail to behind Flamepaw's shoulder, and she spun around to find Mothwing staring oddly at the two of them, a couple of mice held in her jaws.

"Um, how much did you hear?" Flamepaw asked, suddenly embarrassed. She shrunk down, suddenly frightened of what Mothwing's response would be.

"I heard enough. I was just out getting us some breakfast," the medicine cat reassured her. "I never planned on running off by the way."

"I'm sorry. It's been difficult," Flamepaw confessed.

"No offense taken, Flamepaw. I probably should've waited until one of you woke before I went off. Anyway, there's a stream not too far from here where we can get a drink, and then, we'll be on our way," Mothwing explained.

"How soon until we arrive?" Barkpaw wondered.

The she-cat shrugged. "Hopefully by this evening."

"Is the scent still strong?" Flamepaw asked curiously.

"I can still definitely detect it," Mothwing said. "But eat up, both of you." She tossed the two mice toward them, and Flamepaw frowned.

"What about your breakfast, Mothwing?" she asked.

"I already ate. Sorry, but I couldn't wait. I was starving!" she exclaimed, laying down on the sun bathed rocks. "But those mice are fresh and waiting to be eaten."

"Share a mouse?" Barkpaw suggested.

Flamepaw nodded, and together, they ate their breakfast. She was used to eating just half a mouse for breakfast and sharing one with Barkpaw, but she was incredibly hungry today for some reason, probably from the long hike before, and she managed to wolf down the entire second mouse all by herself.

"Bulking up?" Barkpaw wondered.

"Ha-ha," Flamepaw teased. "I'm starving, that's all."

"We did a lot of walking yesterday," Mothwing pointed out. "Plus, you two are still growing warriors. If you need some more food, Barkpaw, let me know."

"I'm good for now," Barkpaw assured her.

"Then, let's head off!" Mothwing decided.

Together, they left the cluster of rocks they had sheltered under for the night and followed Mothwing toward a quaint stream that flowed through some trees. Flamepaw was thrilled to see running water, and she drank away happily, wishing she could submerge her entire body in the water and swim around for a bit. Unfortunately, she had a mission to finish, and all she managed to do was get her paws a bit wet. Still, she missed swimming in RiverClan.

In a few minutes they had left the stream and were continuing on their way, Mothwing leading the way as she followed Korosu and Tigerstripe's scents. As they came closer and closer, Flamepaw felt her paws tingle with anticipation, and her heartbeat sped up with every corner they turned. Perhaps they'd be able to assist RiverClan today. Maybe it wasn't the end.

Flamepaw imagined seeing all the cats she had missed. She hoped her parents were alive and well, as well as her old friends. She wondered if Dusktail would be thrilled to see her and would be impressed by how much she'd grown and how much she learned.

Barkpaw seemed to notice she was deep in thought because he turned to her and stared at her oddly.

"What are you thinking about?" he wondered.

She smiled weakly. "Just about other RiverClan cats. I was wondering if Dusktail would be proud of me."

"I'm sure he would," Barkpaw purred. "I wonder if Rosepettle would think the same of me."

"Of course she would. When we see her, you'll have to show her all the new battle moves you've learned," Flamepaw told him.

Barkpaw nodded, grinning. "I can't wait to tell everyone about the wolves and dogs and that fox! There will be some great stories to share!"

"I know!" Flamepaw exclaimed, squealing slightly.

Mothwing still led the way, however, she remained deathly silent, not partaking in the conversation. Something told Flamepaw that Mothwing did not possess the same optimistic attitude as the two apprentices.

They continued on their way, the sun gradually moving across the sky. They stopped a few times for a snack, but often they were on their feet, racing against the moving sun and following the scent to try to find RiverClan by the end of the day.

It was a long day as they padded through the forest, and Flamepaw grew more and more impatient with each step she took. She just wanted to see RiverClan already, fight off some SwampClan warriors, and head home. She wondered if perhaps she was being a bit too optimistic though.

As the day moved into late afternoon, Mothwing paused by some bushes for a moment. Flamepaw and Barkpaw also halted, wondering why the calico had stopped in her tracks. She sniffed the air and glanced around.

"Something the matter?" Flamepaw asked.

"I'm getting mixed signals," Mothwing explained. "I recognize this part of the forest now, and normally, SwampClan, including the

camp would be to the right," she said, pointing her tail to some tall, leafy bushes.

"Well, let's go!" Barkpaw insisted.

"But Korosu and Tigerstripe's scent goes in the opposite direction, away from camp," Mothwing explained.

"We should just head to the camp," Flamepaw suggested.

"But Korosu and Tigerstripe have been completely correct in their path," Mothwing sighed. "It-it doesn't feel right to head to the SwampClan camp. I know you don't trust her, Flamepaw, but I think what Korosu said is right. If they truly are engaging in battle, they won't be at the camp. Therefore, I think our best bet is to follow their scent and see where it leads."

"Really? You're going to trust that mouse-brained she-cat?!" Flamepaw exclaimed angrily, her fur standing on end.

"It just feels like the right way to go," Mothwing confessed.

"I'm going to the camp!" Flamepaw announced, heading the other way.

"Wait, Flamepaw!" Barkpaw called, stopping her with his tail. "Let's head the other way for a little bit to see where it goes. If we don't find anything, we'll head the other way and go to SwampClan."

Flamepaw growled a little in response.

"We're wasting time," she muttered.

"But if RiverClan truly is in battle, this might be the right way, and therefore it'd be quicker," Mothwing told her. "Plus, I'm willing to bet there are still some cats in camp even if there is a battle going on. It may be safer to go the other way. We could be caught in the clan."

Flamepaw sighed, knowing Mothwing was right. As much as she didn't want to follow Korosu, she knew it was the only way.

"Fine. Let's head in the opposite direction," she agreed.

Soon enough, they were turning away from the camp and following Korosu's scent once again. They followed it for about an hour until they came up a large hill. The sun was beginning to set slightly up ahead, and Flamepaw grew worried, wondering if perhaps going to camp was the best bet.

Then, they emerged through some bushes and found themselves at the top of a hill, giving them a full view of the clearing below. Flamepaw was about to insist they turn back when she gasped, glancing down below.

The clearing was full of cats, armies of them, all battling each other. While one side consisted of cats Flamepaw could not make out, she turned to the other side to find another large clan. And in that large clan, she could immediately spot Goldstar's golden pelt and the pelts of the other RiverClan warriors. The whole clan seemed to be engaged in battle.

"Found them," was all Mothwing managed to say.

Chapter 21

Flamepaw stood, frozen, near the top of the hill, glancing down at her clanmates below. She could not believe that she had finally found them though she had never expected to find them in this way.

She began to race forward when Barkpaw shouted to her, "Flamepaw, what are you doing?!"

"What are you doing?!" she exclaimed. "We have to help!"

Mothwing and Barkpaw raced down to her, stopping her from running down the hill any farther.

"We can't be stupid about this. We can't just rush into battle!" Mothwing exclaimed.

"No, but we have to try to save them," Flamepaw argued angrily, shocked that Mothwing was acting like such a coward. "Maybe we can sneak some away. We have to try, Mothwing!"

And with that, she took off once more, continuing to race down the hill.

"FLAMEPAW!" Mothwing shouted from the hill's edge, but Flamepaw had already raced off into battle, desperate to find her clanmates and lead them to safety.

As she came toward the bottom, she was immediately trapped in a crowd of fighting cats. Yowls and hisses hung in the air, and there was a stench of blood. Already she could see some of her clanmates fighting weakly, and she knew she had to save them.

As she turned her head, she noticed a large, musky colored tom screeching at the fighting cats, including the RiverClan members.

That must be Swampstar, she guessed. What surprised her even more

was to see Korosu by his side, glancing around maliciously at the fighting cats.

Flamepaw gasped, realizing the she-cat must've been in league with Swampstar all along. But why? What did she want to do with him?

Flamepaw's thoughts were cut off as a cat leapt toward her. She screeched and clawed at the cat's belly, pushing him off of her.

"No, I'm not on any side!" she yelled.

With the cat still attempting to pursue her, she disappeared further into the crowd of cats, dodging fighting cats left and right. She was looking around for familiar faces, but the crowd was so tight, it was hard to distinguish any cats.

She leapt up onto a nearby rock and glanced down into the battle below. Her eyes suddenly caught sight of Goldstar fighting nearby, and she sprang back down into battle, throwing a claw or two here and there as she made her way to her leader.

"GOLDSTAR! GOLDSTAR!" she shouted, rushing to the leader.

As she came closer, she froze, frightened. Goldstar looked much worse than she had only a few sunrises before. Dried blood clung onto her face, and she looked to be very thin and weary.

Goldstar turned her head, her eyes falling on Flamepaw. She froze for a moment, giving enough time for the large black tom fighting her to swipe at her side. She shrieked and fell to the ground.

"Get off of her!" Flamepaw shouted, lunging herself at the tom. The tom, however, did not seem to want to be bothered, and he took off, leaving Goldstar lying on the ground in a pile of her own blood.

"Goldstar, Goldstar!" Flamepaw shouted again.

Goldstar let out a raspy cough.

"No, Flamepaw, I told you not to come," she rasped.

"We had to, Goldstar! You needed us! Mothwing and Barkpaw are

here too!" she exclaimed.

Goldstar only blinked.

"You must leave, Flamepaw," she warned, letting out another cough that shook her entire body. It was clear to Flamepaw that she was dying, but Flamepaw couldn't be too worried. She had several lives left, didn't she?

"No, Goldstar, we're here to help," she promised. "Come on. Get up. We have to get you and the other RiverClan warriors out of here."

"It is no use," Goldstar said. "We are all dead or much too weak. Look around. Swampstar's clan is slowly losing. It will not be long now before he retreats."

"But...you can't give up, Goldstar. What about RiverClan?"

"I am dying, Flamepaw," was all Goldstar replied.

"So?!" Flamepaw exclaimed, suddenly furious. Tears flooded into her eyes. "You're our leader, and you have many lives left! You have to help RiverClan! You must! It's your duty!"

Goldstar smiled weakly. "I am on my last life. Do you not think I have tried desperately to rescue my clan already? I have risked my life too many times, and now, I am paying for it."

Flamepaw froze. How could Goldstar already be on her last life? She was a young leader. She didn't deserve this!

"But, Goldstar, I--"

"Heed the advice I told you earlier. RiverClan is finished," Goldstar said.

Flamepaw cried quietly while Goldstar's eyes remained fixated on her.

"I have been proud of you, Flamepaw. I almost wish I had chosen you as my apprentice," she spoke quietly. And then, she slowly closed her eyes and let her head rest on the ground. Flamepaw

watched as her chest rose and fell one last time. Then, the she-cat was motionless.

"No...no!" Flamepaw shrieked, not conceiving the fact her leader was gone for good. She quickly ran away from her dead leader, hoping to find some other clan members. Perhaps Goldstar was gone, but she could easily help the others.

As she ran by, she began to notice Goldstar had been right in what she was saying. Each RiverClan member looked very weak and already injured, and some even lay on the ground, dying. Thankfully, Flamepaw had not seen any familiar faces yet.

She rushed by, suddenly noticing Spotteddusk leaning over another cat.

"Spotteddusk!" she shouted.

The tom turned, and Flamepaw nearly shrieked. Blood had soaked into his white pelt, and one of his eyes were missing. It looked as if the eye had been gone for quite some time, not just in this battle, and she could only imagine what life had been like in SwampClan. Then, she realized it was Rosepettle leaning on him. A deep wound stretched across her flank, and blood poured out of it. Flamepaw knew at once there was no help for her.

She stepped back, not believing what she was seeing. She suddenly wished to escape, not wanting to catch a glimpse of any more of her clanmates. As her paws moved back, however, she felt herself stepping on another cat.

She froze then spun around, her heart pounding. She let out a cry as she glanced down at the cat she had stepped on. Right behind her lay her mother's body, the blood from her wounds still warm. Her eyes were still open, though they did not possess the same warmth they once had. They were glazed now and empty.

"No! No! Mother!" she shrieked.

A cat crept up behind her, and she quickly pushed him off and left a nasty clawmark down his face before running off. She knew now

there was no hope. RiverClan was finished once and for all if the many injured and dead cats she had seen did not prove it already.

She quickly leapt onto another rock, distancing herself from the battle. As she glanced around, she watched as Swampstar whispered something to Korosu. Then, the two quietly snuck away.

What a coward, she thought. *He's ditching his clanmates because he knows they are losing.*

And it was true. The fight was already beginning to come to a cease. Many of SwampClan's cats were dead or severely injured or had retreated already. Flamepaw glanced around, hoping to catch a glimpse of either Mothwing or Barkpaw. She wanted to get out of here and forget the images she had seen.

"Flamepaw!" came a nearby shout.

Flamepaw glanced down, noticing both Barkpaw and Mothwing standing below her. Barkpaw had a nick on his ear, which he most likely received from another cat, though Mothwing seemed to be unharmed.

Flamepaw leapt down from the rock, trying to keep it together.

"We-we have to get out of here," she stammered.

"But what about your plan?" Barkpaw asked.

"Goldstar is dead," Flamepaw spoke quietly.

"But she has more lives!" Mothwing argued.

Flamepaw shook her head, and a gasp echoed from both Mothwing and Barkpaw.

"We've already seen a few dead clanmates, but I can't believe that our leader is dead," Mothwing lamented.

"Goldstar was right. It's too late now. Swampstar already ran off. He knows they're losing. We have to leave while we can," Flamepaw insisted.

"Are you sure? But RiverClan--" Barkpaw began to argue.

"Goldstar was right. RiverClan is finished," Flamepaw announced.

"Come on. Let's escape through these woods," Mothwing suggested, leading them further from the battle and back into the forest. Flamepaw slowly traveled behind them, the shrieks of cats still ringing in her ears.

"Flamepaw, are you okay?" Barkpaw asked.

"I stepped on my mother's body," she spoke quietly.

"Oh, Flamepaw!" Barkpaw exclaimed. "I didn't know!"

Flamepaw suddenly stopped and began to sob hysterically. Mothwing came to a halt as well, and for a while, they all sat, embracing each other and weeping quietly.

"Rosepettle...she's gone too," Flamepaw said.

Barkpaw's tears came more quickly now, and together, they sat in the quiet of the forest, slowly realizing that the clan they had grown up in had now vanished from existence.

Chapter 22

It was near evening by the time that they had finally decided to set off again. For a while, all three cats had satin the forest, trying to contemplate what was to be done. It was incredibly hard for all of them to grasp the idea that RiverClan was over with.

Flamepaw could not keep out the image of her mother's body or of Goldstar's lifeless eyes staring at her. Barkpaw did his best to comfort her, but she knew he was struggling greatly too. Mothwing had not spoken a word since.

Finally, their growling stomachs had forced them to move on their way, though Flamepaw had no notion of where they were going. They just silently wandered through the forest, unsure of which direction they were heading toward.

A mouse scampered across in front of the group of cats, and Flamepaw watched as Barkpaw killed it swiftly.

"Here, you have it," he said, tossing it to Flamepaw.

Flamepaw was starving, and her mouth watered at the sight of the dead mouse.

"We can share," she suggested, even though she'd rather have the entire mouse for herself.
Barkpaw shook his head. "I'm not hungry."

"Mothwing?" Flamepaw asked.

Mothwing also shook her head.

Flamepaw felt a bit guilty about eating without them, but she devoured the entire mouse anyway, glad to ease her growling stomach. Barkpaw and Mothwing just sat down and stared at

nothing.

Flamepaw too felt the same depression that they did. If anything, she should've been affected the most having seen the most out of all of them. She had been the one who had so desperately wanted to help her clan, and now, there was nothing that they could do.

There had been no talk of what was to happen to them. Flamepaw herself had no idea what she would do. Would she join another clan? Or perhaps she'd live life as a rogue? She'd lived a rogue life for many moons already.

She wasn't sure what Barkpaw wanted either. She wanted to stay by him no matter what. She supposed now they could become mates officially since the RiverClan business was over, but Flamepaw didn't want to force anything onto him. It would be awhile before they were all decided and settled.

Once the sky became dark, it was Flamepaw who spoke up about finding shelter. She could not believe how disoriented Barkpaw and Mothwing were. Perhaps she had already gone through so much distress that it no longer affected her. All of this seemed to be new for Barkpaw and Mothwing.

"It's getting dark," Flamepaw informed them.

Mothwing glanced up at the indigo sky where tiny stars were beginning to appear.

"So it is," she agreed. She paused for a moment, then kept walking.

"We should find a place to sleep," Flamepaw suggested.

"Yeah, yeah we should," Barkpaw agreed, now back to his senses.

Flamepaw looked around and led Mothwing and Barkpaw to a small cave made by some adjacent rocks. While Barkpaw and Mothwing crawled inside, she fetched some moss and gave it to them as nests.

Mothwing went to sleep right away without a word while Flamepaw and Barkpaw seemed to be kept awake by the reality in front of them. Flamepaw tossed and turned but could not get

comfortable.

"I bet all those RiverClan warriors are looking down at us from StarClan tonight," Barkpaw murmured at one point, noticing Flamepaw was far from asleep.

Flamepaw nodded, her eyes fixated on the shining stars. She imagined her mother was looking down at her, as well as Goldstar. She hoped they were happy and at peace in StarClan, no longer subject to the cruel ways of Swampstar.

The stars calming her,Flamepaw found herself ever so slowly falling asleep with Barkpaw by her side .She shut her eyes, hoping to wake up in RiverClan the next morning.

For several sunrises they wandered through the forest with no clear goal in mind. Barkpaw and Mothwing were slowly recovering, as was Flamepaw, but there had been no talk of the future. Flamepaw had been pleased to see Mothwing and Barkpaw finally regaining their appetities. Mothwing was chatting again, and Barkpaw was too.

The emotional toll was still strong, but Flamepaw could feel herself slowly recovering. She felt odd though, changed perhaps. Her appetite could never be satisfied for some reason, and she found it harder and harder to get comfortable at night. Even walking felt odd for her at times, and she wondered if she'd been injured or if something had happened during the battle.

Barkpaw and Mothwing didn't seem to notice, so Flamepaw guessed it was nothing too serious.

One day they were up and about, wandering through the forest once more. Flamepaw was hoping to bring up the subject of the future today, but she wasn't sure how Barkpaw and Mothwing would take it. They seemed perfectly content in this "limbo," never wondering about the future. They were living like they were simply dreaming and that all their problems would be solved upon awakening.

After a breakfast of some rabbits, Flamepaw cleared her throat,

causing Barkpaw and Mothwing to glance at her.

"Something wrong?" Mothwing asked.

"It's just...it's been nearly half a moon since the battle, and we've just been wandering through the forest.I-I want to talk about our future. What are we going to do?" Flamepaw asked.

Barkpaw was silent, but Mothwing's eyes widened.

"How can you dismiss RiverClan so quickly?!" she exclaimed, bearing her sharp teeth at Flamepaw.

Flamepaw was a bit taken aback, and she kept her mouth shut as Mothwing rose and disappeared into the brush.

"I didn't mean it that way," Flamepaw spoke quietly.

"Don't mind Mothwing," Barkpaw told her. "She's having the most trouble adjusting, I think."

"Have you thought about it?" Flamepaw asked.

"Somewhat," Barkpaw replied. "ButI don't know yet. I'm not sure if I want to think about it yet."

"But we need to, Barkpaw. Especially if we wanted to become mates..."

"I know, I know," Barkpaw replied. "I'll start thinking about it, okay? Do you have any thoughts? Do you want to join another clan? Do you want to live as a rogue?"

"I'm not sure yet. I've been waiting for you," Flamepaw told him.

Barkpaw sighed. "Well, we'll see what happens. I'll start thinking about it, okay?"

"Barkpaw, I don't want to live like this forever," Flamepaw urgently told him.

Barkpaw sighed once more.

"I'll think about it," he said again, rising from the ground. He glanced at the bushes that Mothwing disappeared into.

"I'll go check on Mothwing. She's probably upset," he said. "You coming?"

Flamepaw shook her head, secretly jealous as Barkpaw disappeared into the same brush. Since when had Barkpaw and Mothwing become so close? Flamepaw had always been close to Mothwing, and now, she could only upset her friend, not even comfort her.

Finding herself thirsty, she remembered there was a small pond nearby. She struggled to her feet, nearly tripping over her own paws. She cursed at herself for being clumsy, wondering why she was having so much trouble moving around.

Leaving the clearing, she wandered toward the nearby pond and stuck her head down toward the clear water, beginning to lick up the refreshing water. She drank for a while until her thirst was quenched and then lifted her head.

She was about to turn and move away when her eyes found her reflection in the water. She had not seen her reflection in awhile, and she stared at it with curiosity. She stood up further, glancing at her entire body in the reflection of the water.

She looked with astonishment.From what the water reflected back at her, it looked as if she'd gained weight in her stomach. She paused for a moment, wondering if perhaps this was just the pond playing tricks on her.

When glancing down, however, she noticed her stomach had swelled some, and she froze, wondering how this could be. Sure, she'd been eating more, but she had a large appetite. It wasn't as if she were a kittypet lazing around all day.

She pondered harder, then froze. No, it couldn't be. But it all made sense, didn't it? The stomach swelling, the increasing appetite, her struggling to move around and get comfortable at night. Oh, how had she not noticed before?!

Glancing down at the pond and staring at her swollen stomach, Flamepaw was seized with fear, excitement, and apprehension.

"I'm pregnant," she gasped.

Chapter 23

Flamepaw remained motionless for a few moments, not sure how to react. She couldn't believe it. She was carrying Barkpaw's kits, and she had been oblivious to it this entire time.

Soon, thoughts of anxiety began to fill her mind. What if the birth of the kits went wrong? What if she was too young to have kits? How could she raise kits as rogues? How would she provide for them? Her heart pounded with the stress.

And she knew she had to tell Barkpaw eventually. Though they weren't ever officially mates, they knew the love they felt for each other. But what if he didn't want to take on the responsibility of being a father? What if he left her? Flamepaw felt just about ready to burst into tears.

"Flamepaw, are you there?" Barkpaw called.

Flamepaw froze and spun around, finding him peeking his head out of some bushes.

"I—um—yes," she stammered. "Just getting some water."

"Oh, well, I spoke to Mothwing, and it seems she's feeling better now. Are you ready to come back?" he asked.

"Yes, I..."

"Good. Let's go," he said, leading her through the brush.

Flamepaw followed closely behind, guilt filling her. She desperately wanted to tell Barkpaw the news, but she was unsure how he would react. She trailed behind him, debating back and forth between telling him or not.

"Barkpaw," she spoke up at last.

"Yeah?" he called from ahead of her.

"Um...I have to tell you something--"

She stopped talking as soon as they came out of the bushes and into a clearing. Mothwing sat there cleaning her fur, her eyes widening as they fell upon Flamepaw.

"Here we are," Barkpaw said, coming to a halt in the clearing. "Sorry, what were you going to say?"

"Um, nothing."

Barkpaw seemed satisfied with this answer and simply shrugged.

"I'm sorry, Flamepaw," Mothwing confessed. "For getting just a bit high-strung back there. It's been very difficult for me to cope with all of this."

"I understand. It's been difficult for me too," Flamepaw assured her.

"And you're right. I know we have to think about all this eventually, but I can't tonight," Mothwing explained.

"That's okay, Mothwing. Maybe tomorrow?"

"Maybe," Mothwing said quietly.

Flamepaw nodded, though she desperately wanted to tell everyone the news. She felt as if she were carrying a large secret (literally). She was surprised that Mothwing and Barkpaw didn't seem to notice at all. Maybe it wasn't as noticeable as she thought.

She stared longingly in Barkpaw's direction, desperately wanting to tell him the news. She knew she had to tell him today as soon as possible, but she didn't want to tell him with Mothwing around. She wasn't sure how her friend would react, and she wanted Barkpaw to be the first to know.

Unfortunately, it seemed they could rarely find alone time for the rest of the day. They were always walking side by side as they traveled, and it seemed that Flamepaw could find no spare time with Barkpaw.

As evening fell, she was beginning to give up when Barkpaw finally spoke up.

"This clearing seems like it'll make do for today," he suggested.

Mothwing nodded, and Flamepaw did as well.

"I'm starving," Mothwing mewed.

"Me too," Flamepaw replied.

"How about I gather moss while you and Mothwing catch dinner?" he suggested.

"Um, actually, could I help you gather moss? Would that be all right, Mothwing?" she asked, turning to her calico friend.

Mothwing paused, then nodded. "I'm sure I could find at least two mice. I'll be back," she said.

"Good. Let's head this way," Barkpaw suggested, leading Flamepaw into the bushes. Mothwing disappeared the other way, leaving Flamepaw and Barkpaw alone at last.

They walked for a few minutes before Flamepaw finally spoke up.

"Barkpaw," she said.

"Yeah?" he asked.

"Remember how earlier I said I had to tell you something?"

"Yeah."

"Um, can we talk right now?" Flamepaw asked.

"Shouldn't we gather the moss first?" Barkpaw wondered.

"Well, yes, but--"

"It can wait, right?"

"Well, actually--"

"Hey, I think I see some moss over there!" Barkpaw exclaimed.

"Barkpaw!" she shouted at last.

He spun around, confused. "What?"

"I-I'm expecting your kits—our kits," she stammered.

Barkpaw froze and turned his gaze away from the moss, staring back at Flamepaw.

"You're what?" he asked, completely shocked.

"I'm pregnant," she announced.

There was a moment of silence between them, and Flamepaw braced herself in fear of what he might say in response.

"You're sure you haven't just gained some weight?" he asked.

"Barkpaw!" Flamepaw gasped.

"I'm kidding," he responded, chuckling lightly. "I...wow...this is a lot to take in. Congratulations! I'm really happy, I promise." He ran towards her and nuzzled her gently, causing Flamepaw to purr in satisfaction.

"You-you're happy?" Flamepaw asked.

"Why wouldn't I be? I love you, Flamepaw, and I'll love our kits even more," Barkpaw promised.

"I know this is the worst timing," she said.

"That's why I didn't know what to say," Barkpaw responded. "I know I've been putting off what to do as much as Mothwing, but now that I know our kits are on the way...They can't be rogues, Flamepaw."

"That's what I was thinking too," Flamepaw admitted. "I don't like this lifestyle, and I know you don't like it either, but RiverClan is gone."

"Well, maybe they can be rogues...we have Mothwing, and she's a

medicine cat..."

"That's not the life I want for them, Barkpaw. We still haven't even gotten our warrior names. I'm a clan cat, Barkpaw, and so are you. I-I want to join another clan," Flamepaw confessed. She had wanted to tell him this for a while, but it taken her some time to realize what she really wanted.

"I'd love to join another clan too, but what clan would we even join?" he wondered.

Flamepaw pondered for a few moments until an idea suddenly hit her.

"SnowClan," she said.

"What?" Barkpaw asked.

"The clan that SwampClan was fighting against," Flamepaw explained.

"The one that killed our clanmates?" Barkpaw questioned.

"No, I don't believe they killed any of them. If anything, it was SwampClan. They were probably already so fatigued that a minor scratch knocked the life out of them," Flamepaw said. "But they were winning, Barkpaw, and the clan seemed so orderly, so large. I want our kits to grow up in a safe clan, and I think SnowClan would do just that."

"How do you know they'll even let us in?" Barkpaw asked.

"We can explain the situation to them. We can tell them about what SwampClan did to us and our clanmates."

"So they'll pity us?" Barkpaw asked.

"I know my guess is a longshot, but we have to at least try. If they won't let us in, maybe one of the clans nearby will. But we can't keep wandering like this, Barkpaw, especially now that I have kits on the way," Flamepaw explained.

"Have you told Mothwing?" Barkpaw inquired.

Flamepaw shook her head.

"What will she say? Will she want to come to SnowClan with us?" he wondered.

Flamepaw shrugged. "The decision is hers. But I will tell her, I promise. I wouldn't be surprised if she already knew, really. She must be used to taking care of queens."

Barkpaw nodded.

There was a bit of silence between them, and then Barkpaw smiled.

"I'm just really happy!" he exclaimed once again.

Flamepaw smiled and nuzzled him, though she still grew nervous. Even if she was able to get to a clan in time before her kits' birth, would she be a good mother? Would Barkpaw be a good father? There was still so much to worry about.

"Come on. We really should be gathering moss," he said, heading back toward the pile he had discovered earlier.

Flamepaw nodded and bounded after him, a bit more joyous now that she had an actual plan on how to safely raise her kits.

Chapter 24

Flamepaw and Barkpaw returned to where the cats had decided to camp out for the night with fresh moss for their nests. Mothwing was already back and waiting for them with two dead robins at her paws.

"They were an easy catch," she explained when they entered.

Barkpaw dropped the moss down and began folding it into three separate nests.

"You two were sure gone awhile. I didn't think it'd take that long to gather some moss," Mothwing observed.

Flamepaw shrugged and turned to Barkpaw, helping him with the nests. Barkpaw shot her a look, which she supposed meant that she should talk to Mothwing, but Flamepaw only shook her head. She had just gotten over the shock of telling Barkpaw. She didn't want to also tell everything to Mothwing tonight too.

After the nests were completed, Flamepaw and Barkpaw shared a robin while Mothwing ate her own. There was very little chatter among them, and soon enough, they were all tired and exhausted from a long day, Flamepaw especially.

Flamepaw curled up beside Barkpaw and purred slightly, imagining the day when they would raise their kits in an actual clan. She fell asleep with these thoughts on her mind and spent the entire night dreaming of having her kits and being a mother.

When Flamepaw awoke the next morning, Barkpaw was not beside her, and she tensed, fearing for a moment that he had left her in the middle of the night after hearing of her pregnancy. She sat up quickly, terrified that she would now have to raise the kits on her own, when Mothwing spoke up.

"He went to catch some breakfast," Mothwing explained.

Flamepaw turned, not realizing the calico was already up. She sat across from Flamepaw in her nest, staring at her. Flamepaw wondered how long Mothwing had been watching her, and she immediately felt embarrassed.

"Yes, of course," Flamepaw muttered, laying back down. She got her swollen stomach into a comfortable position and rested her head back on her paws, letting out a low yawn.

Mothwing, meanwhile, just sat there, and an awkward silence existed between the two. Flamepaw knew now would be a good time to talk to Mothwing, but she still didn't want to and felt nervous about the whole affair.

She waited around for a while, but when Barkpaw didn't return, she knew he had purposely planned to leave them alone. Flamepaw let out a sigh and sat back up, fixing her eyes on Mothwing. Her stomach growled, and she wished Barkpaw would return with food, but it seemed liked she needed to get through this conversation first.

"So...how are you?" Flamepaw asked casually.

Mothwing stared at her oddly then shrugged. "Fine, I guess. Um, you?"

"Good," was all Flamepaw managed to reply. She bit the inside of her cheek, knowing she had to get this over with, but it was all so awkward, and she wasn't sure how to put it.

"Um, you know, Barkpaw and I have been thinking a lot about what we're going to do now that RiverClan is gone," Flamepaw announced.

Mothwing's eyes widened.

"Oh, really? I mean, I've been beginning to think about it just a little..."

"Oh, that's good," Flamepaw responded.

"Yeah..."

Once again, there was another incredibly long pause as silence flooded between them.

"I don't know if Barkpaw's told you anything..."

"About what?" Mothwing asked innocently.

Of course he wouldn't, Flamepaw thought. *She is my friend, and it's my responsibility to tell her.*
"Um...well...for a while now I've been feeling odd and such. I just kind of shooed the feeling away at first but I was looking at my reflection in the pond yesterday and well...I think I'm pregnant," Flamepaw explained. This was a lie. She knew for certain she was pregnant.

Mothwing didn't seem surprised.

"Well, you are, and I had a guess," Mothwing replied casually.

"Wait, what?" Flamepaw asked.

"Yeah, I noticed you'd been gaining some weight and acting a bit differently. At first I thought maybe it was a coping mechanism, but I've dealt with queens in the medicine cat den before, and you are definitely acting like one," Mothwing said.

"Why didn't you tell me?" Flamepaw asked. "How long have you known?"

"Longer than you have. I wanted you to figure it out for yourself. I've been going through a lot too, Flamepaw. I didn't feel it was right to throw that on you as well."

"Oh..."

"I'm assuming you've told Barkpaw," Mothwing spoke after a while.

"Oh, yes. That's what I also want to talk to you about. We-we can't do this anymore, Mothwing. Barkpaw and I both agreed that it'd be best to raise our kits in a clan," Flamepaw explained. "And we think the best clan to do that in is SnowClan, the clan that SwampClan was attacking."

"I had a feeling you two couldn't survive as rogues," Mothwing replied.

"We wanted to ask if you'd join us, Mothwing. Maybe there's a medicine cat position open, or you could always be a warrior. We could work something out," Flamepaw suggested.

Mothwing did exactly what Flamepaw expected her to do. She shook her head.

"Like I said, I've been thinking too, and I just can't join another clan after RiverClan. I've lost so many close friends. It would be hard to start all over. I'm not sure where my journey will take me, but for now, a rogue life will suffice," Mothwing told her.

Flamepaw frowned. "But, Mothwing, you're such a social she-cat. Can you really survive alone?"
"I think I've changed a bit," Mothwing admitted. "But I want to thank you for extending the invitation. And, congratulations also on the kits. I really am excited for you. I think you and Barkpaw will make great parents."

"You think so?" Flamepaw asked, her spirits lifting a little. She was still disappointed that Mothwing would not be joining them.

"Of course," Mothwing replied, smiling warmly. "And I'm sure your kits will grow up to be great warriors too."

"Thank you," Flamepaw replied. "If it's not too much to ask, could you inspect me? I'd like to know when they're due and what herbs I should eat and all that."

Mothwing grinned and beckoned her over. Flamepaw stood awkwardly as Mothwing inspected her stomach. Then, after a few more minutes, she spoke.

"I don't think they'll be due for a little while. I think the soonest they would come would be the end of the moon. You two should be able to make it to SnowClan in plenty of time. The medicine cat there will be take care of you then," Mothwing explained.

"Thanks. What herbs, if I can find any, should I eat?"

"Borage leaves will help your milk come, but I wouldn't worry too much about finding those. You should be able to make it to SnowClan in time. If, for some reason, you give birth before arriving, raspberry leaves should ease the pain of kitting, but it will still be painful," Mothwing advised.

"Do you know how many kits there are?" Flamepaw asked.

Mothwing shook her head. "It's too early to tell, but I think you'll be having more than one."
One would be so much easier, Flamepaw thought, but then again, she'd been a sole kit, and she missed having siblings to play with in the nursery.

"Thank you again, Mothwing. Are you absolutely sure you don't want to come?"

"My mind is made up. When will you be leaving?"

Flamepaw shrugged. "Probably as early as tomorrow now that I've told you. I want to get to SnowClan as quickly as possible."

"Well, we better make the most of the day, then," Mothwing decided.

Flamepaw smiled, and after a brief period of silence, Barkpaw emerged out of the bushes with a squirrel and mouse.

"What did I miss?" he asked.

Flamepaw rolled her eyes. "I know for a fact you were hiding in those bushes waiting for me to talk to Mothwing."

"But my plan worked, didn't it?" Barkpaw pointed out, padding toward them with breakfast.
"Well, I suppose everything is decided then. Now, can we eat? I'm starving!" Mothwing exclaimed.

"Me too," Flamepaw complained.

"A mouse for you," Barkpaw said, tossing one at Mothwing. "And we can share the squirrel."

"Perfect. Thank you," Flamepaw said, licking his cheek.

Barkpaw smiled warmly and laid down next to her, sharing their meal together. Flamepaw watched as Mothwing licked her breakfast up and felt a pang of sadness. This would be their last day together with her, and though Flamepaw was sad to leave her friend behind, she knew what she was doing was for the best. The next day, she and Barkpaw would be heading off to SnowClan.

Chapter 25

Flamepaw awoke early in the morning, the previous day's memories still flooding through her mind. She had made sure to enjoy her last day with Mothwing, and looking back on the day, she knew she had accomplished this. She, Barkpaw, and Mothwing had chatted happily about their future and had reminisced on RiverClan in general all day, even stopping to rest and have some fun along the way. Flamepaw smiled at the thought of this.

Beside her, Barkpaw began to stir, and Flamepaw let out a sigh, knowing that as soon as everyone awoke, it would be time to depart. She glanced forward at Mothwing, who still slept, her calico tail drooped around her pale nose.

Flamepaw hoped she'd run into Mothwing again some day. Perhaps then Mothwing could meet her kits and tell her of all the exciting adventures she'd had.

"Flamepaw, are you awake?" Barkpaw whispered. He no longer was lying down but was instead crouching next to her, being careful not to be too loud.

Flamepaw nodded her head slowly and rose.

"We'll have to leave soon," Barkpaw told her.

"We should at least enjoy breakfast first," Flamepaw suggested. Barkpaw nodded and went off in search of food.

By the time he had returned, Mothwing had just risen, and she lazily padded over to the two squirrels Barkpaw had caught, a look of admiration on her face.

"Sorry for sleeping in. I know I'm normally catching prey in the morning," Mothwing said.

"Don't be. Barkpaw was fine getting us some food. Besides, we'll have to get used to it now," Flamepaw said, her voice taking on a more somber tone in the last few words.

Mothwing smiled weakly, and together, they sat and ate their meal together. Flamepaw kept glancing over at Mothwing, images of the young she-cat rushing through her head. She recalled their time in the nursery together, when she and Mothwing went to get herbs, and so much more. She couldn't forget the quest to find Goldstar either though she supposed the quest had been a failure anyway. RiverClan was gone.

Flamepaw ate slowly, trying to delay their departure, but eventually, there was no more meat to eat or pick at, and she was forced to give in.

"I think we're about ready to go," Barkpaw announced, having finished his share of the squirrel much earlier than Flamepaw.

Flamepaw slowly rose to her feet too, her enlarged belly swaying slightly. Mothwing stared at both at them and smiled.

"Well, I suppose this is good-bye," she said.

Flamepaw felt tears gathering in her eyes.

"You can visit us anytime you like," Flamepaw offered. "It'd be lovely if you came to SnowClan."
Mothwing smiled weakly. "I'm not sure if I'll ever be in the vicinity, but if I am, I'll be sure to stop by. I wish both of you the best of luck, and I hope the delivery goes well. Your kits will be beautiful," she told both Flamepaw and Barkpaw.

"Good luck to you as well," Barkpaw said.

"May StarClan grant you safety," Flamepaw told her friend.

"Hopefully this isn't good-bye forever," Mothwing mewed.
Flamepaw rushed to her side and nuzzled her, not wishing to leave her friend. But it had to be.

Mothwing turned in one direction and Flamepaw and Barkpaw in

the other. They all waved their tails good-bye and spun around. As Flamepaw went off with Barkpaw off to SnowClan, she glanced back one last time, catching her last glimpse of her friend before they headed off.

The first few days of the journey had been difficult for Flamepaw. It was hard to get used to the idea that Mothwing was no longer with them and that RiverClan was no more. It was hard traveling to a clan that very well may not accept them because of their prior loyalty. But Flamepaw needed a home for her kits, and they at least had to try.

The two had easily been able to pick up familiar scents and retrace the route back to the fated battleground where Flamepaw had witnessed the death of her clan. She hoped that she would not run into any more images like that once they arrived.

At times, Flamepaw wondered if she was really doing the right thing leaving Mothwing behind, but then she would feel a slight movement within in her stomach and was comforted, knowing she had made the right decision.

She and Barkpaw, once they had gotten over the loss of Mothwing, would chat excitedly about what would await them in SnowClan, one thing being their warrior names. Flamepaw knew she was well over twelve moons now, and she couldn't wait for the day when she could ditch the "paw" part of her name and exchange it for a warrior name. She only hoped the leader of SnowClan would comply to her wishes.

Barkpaw was excited for this too, and the two would often joke about what they wanted their warrior names to be. It was all fun, but it made Flamepaw wonder what she wanted her warrior name to be, and she wondered if the SnowClan leader would let her choose.

Barkpaw, meanwhile, spoke of his desire to fulfill warrior duties. He boasted about patrols and hunting and even having an apprentice of his own to teach. Flamepaw had to warn him that it might take them some time to be accepted among the SnowClan members before they could become that much involved.

Flamepaw, unfortunately, didn't have the luxurity of a warrior to look forward to. She knew that as soon as she arrived, it would be straight to the nursery where in less than a moon she would deliver her kits. This thought was exciting but also terrifying at the same time. She hoped the other queens would be welcoming and that the other kits wouldn't be too annoying. The thought of raising kits definitely frightened her as well. She hoped she could teach them to be loyal and kind warriors like her mother had done.

All in all, if all went well, both Flamepaw and Barkpaw were excited to join a new clan and once again relive clan life. Spending time as a rogue made Flamepaw realize how much she craved clan life and how much rogue life was not for her. She needed to be in a community that defended each other, and she was perfectly fine with transitioning her loyalty from RiverClan to SnowClan. She just needed a clan to support again.

The sunrises came and went, and after nearly fifteen sunrises, Flamepaw knew that they were almost back at SnowClan. She could tell in the way the trees grew taller and the scent changed. She could tell by the way her memories of that fateful day were easily recalled.

The journey had been tiring and long, but Flamepaw knew it would be worth it once they arrived. Her stomach had grown to a larger size since their departure, and Flamepaw had begun to fear she'd give birth before they arrived. Barkpaw, meanwhile, dismissed his fears and assured her they'd arrive in time.

One morning, they awoke, and Flamepaw felt it in her bones that this would be the day that they would stumble upon SnowClan. She knew already that they were in the same forest as the battle had taken place and knew that the clan could not be far. Already, she and Barkpaw had been able to pick up the faint scents of other cats, letting them know that clans were nearby.

Flamepaw lazily opened her eyes to find a mouse sitting near her. Barkpaw was already sitting up and staring at her. When her eyes fell upon him, he smiled slightly.

"Morning, sleepyhead. You slept awhile," he noticed.

Flamepaw grinned and slowly sat up, beginning to eat the mouse that had been caught for her.

"I feel like we're going to get there today," Barkpaw told her.

"Me too," Flamepaw replied. A breeze had settled over them, reminding them of leaf-bare that had just recently arrived.

After breakfast, Flamepaw rose to her feet, and they began their descent further into the woods. As they continued on their quest, the scents of cats became more clear and distinct. While the scents were still stale, they were stronger than the previous ones, and Flamepaw knew that with each step, they were growing closer and closer to their future in SnowClan.

"I'm excited," Flamepaw whispered to Barkpaw as they continued to walk.

"Me too," Barkpaw purred. Together they sounded like young kits in the nursery.

They continued walking, admiring the scenery of the forest that would become their home. As the day grew on, the scents became incredibly strong, and Flamepaw knew they would be approaching borders soon.

At one point, Barkpaw froze and sniffed the ground near him.

"This is most definitely a border," he said.

"Well, we're almost there. Come on," Flamepaw called, stepping over it.

"Maybe we should wait until a patrol comes by," he suggested.

"You're such a wimp," Flamepaw teased. "We're not here to invade the clan. Come on. It'll be all right."

Barkpaw still seemed nervous but he agreed, and they continued into the territory of an unknown clan, which Flamepaw prayed was SnowClan. She was fairly certain it was, for she recognized the scent as being on of the strongest in the battle. While other clans

had fought, she had noticed that SnowClan seemed to have the largest number. She was just hoping her guess was correct.

They had not been walking too long when the sound of footsteps approached, and a voice cried out, "Halt! Why are you trespassing SnowClan territory?"

Chapter 26

lamepaw froze and spun around to find a group of cats staring at them intimidatingly. The cat who had spoken was a white tom, larger than both Flamepaw and Barkpaw. Flamepaw and Barkpaw both froze in their tracks, not wanting to cause any trouble.

For a moment though, Flamepaw wanted to shout in joy. It turned out they had found SnowClan after all! And the journey hadn't been to terrible. Now she'd have a home for her kits. She had to remind herself, however, that they might not necessarily be allowed to join.

"We don't mean any harm," Barkpaw spoke quickly.

Flamepaw rolled her eyes. *Way to screw it up early,* she thought, knowing the SnowClan cats had to be suspicious now.

"Who are you?" a white and gray she-cat asked.

"How about they answer my first question," the white tom suggested.

"Like my mate said, we don't mean any harm. We've been traveling long and far with the hope of being able to join SnowClan," Flamepaw explained.

"We came from RiverClan," Barkpaw explained. "Our clan was taken hostage under SwampClan, which we know you have recently dealt with. With our clan destroyed, we had nowhere else left to go."

"What's to say you aren't SwampClan cats?" a ginger tom growled.

"The battle was nearly a moon ago, Blazeheart," the white and gray she-cat reminded him.

"You're from RiverClan?" the white tom interrupted. He seemed to be leading the patrol, and all the cats fell silent once he spoke.

Flamepaw nodded.

"I'm Flamepaw," she explained. "And this is my mate, Barkpaw."

"They don't look like apprentices," a young calico she-cat squeaked. She looked like a new apprentice herself. "Flamepaw looks as if she's going to explode with kits."

"Hush, Leafpaw," her mentor snapped.

"Our clan disappeared near the end of our apprenticehood," Barkpaw explained. "We are of warrior age, and we're hoping you'll allow us to join. Flamepaw's kits will be due shortly, and we want to raise them in a clan. In addition, we haven't been able to experience clan life in moons, and we want to devote our loyalty to a clan again."

The white tom raised his eyebrow slightly.

"You two do seem as if you have been through a lot, and I believe you. Unfortunately, the decision isn't up to me. My name's Cloudfur, and I'm the deputy of SnowClan. But we'll happily take you to our camp. Maybe Smokestar will let you join."

"Oh, thank you!" Flamepaw exclaimed.

"This way," Cloudfur said, leading the two farther into the forest.

Flamepaw awkwardly padded by Barkpaw's side, trying to ignore the curious glances from the cats around them. She hadn't meant to cause such a huge commotion with her arrival. She secretly wished they had been found by just the deputy instead of a whole patrol.

They didn't have to walk too long until Flamepaw was led into a large camp. Immediately, she was filled with old memories of the RiverClan camp. She felt a pang of sorrow as she watched young kits tumble around while other cats chatted with each other or laid out in the sun to warm their pelts.

"I didn't realize I missed this so much," Barkpaw muttered.

Flamepaw nodded, glad he felt the same.

"Smokestar is here," Cloudfur said, leading them to a den on the farthest side of camp. "Let me speak to him for a second."

Flamepaw nodded and awkwardly waited outside the leader's den until Cloudfur emerged again.

"You can go in," he told her.

Flamepaw nodded, glad to be away from the glances of cats again. She and Barkpaw both went inside and found an older white tom with black spots sitting on top of his nest, staring at the two.

"You're Flamepaw and Barkpaw?" he asked.

Flamepaw nodded.

"Yes, Smokestar, sir. We've come to ask approval to join your clan. We lost ours unfortunately to SwampClan, and we desperately would like to experience clan life again."

"Well, I must say you're not the first RiverClan cats we've received," Smokestar noted.

"Who else is here?" Barkpaw asked curiously.

"Troutfin," Smokestar said.

Flamepaw's fur stood on end. So the cowardly deputy had sought shelter here too? She couldn't help but feel enraged that the she-cat was still alive and well.

"She was our former deputy," Barkpaw explained when Flamepaw did not reply.

"I'm willing to allow you to join," Smokestar said, "But I expect your loyalty to this clan. SnowClan is not a refugee camp but a clan that fights and protects each other. You must swear your loyalty to this clan and protect it at all costs."

"We promise. We will," Flamepaw assured him.

"Very well. If I'm not mistaken, it seems you two are in need of

some warrior ceremonies. Allow me a few minutes, and then we'll make you official SnowClan warriors," Smokestar explained.

"Yes. Thank you!" Barkpaw exclaimed.

He and Flamepaw both left Smokestar's den, and Flamepaw's eyes scanned the crowd until she found Troutfin sitting near the edge of camp licking her fur. Without warning, she stalked toward the she-cat, anger flooding through her.

"Flamepaw, wait! Where are you going?" Barkpaw called, following after her.

"TROUTFIN!" Flamepaw snapped.

The she-cat glanced up, clearly surprised.

"Flamepaw? Barkpaw? I was sure I wouldn't run into you two again," Troutfin admitted.

"I HAVE A BONE TO PICK--"

"We're glad to see you," Barkpaw interrupted, shoving Flamepaw slightly. He glanced at her and whispered, "Calm down," before glancing back at Troutfin.

"You two look much older than apprentices now, and Flamepaw, you're pregnant!"

"I'm aware," Flamepaw said.

"I-I know you're furious with me, and you have every right to be," Troutfin sighed. "I was a coward. I managed to escape, and when I did, I didn't know what to do. My mind seemed to go insane, and I practically lost it. I should've told you two about RiverClan. Together we could've done something. But I was too frightened."

Flamepaw froze, not expecting such a heartfelt apology. She suddenly felt guilty for screaming at the she-cat only moments before.

"I did return," Troutfin promised. "But by then it was too late. Our

clan was already in too much trouble and danger. I managed to survive the battle, and I sought refuge here. Some others survived too, but most perished. Those who did survive went off. I think they were too distraught to stay."

Flamepaw nodded, expecting to hear such bad news about the battle. She tried to block the images of the bloody event from her mind.

"I know Mothwing managed to escape and not be found," Troutfin said. "She may still be out there."

"She found us," Flamepaw explained. "That's how we found out about all of this and SwampClan."

"Oh...what happened to her?" Troutfin asked, realizing the she-cat was not with them.

"She decided not to join us," Barkpaw said. "Losing RiverClan was too hard for her."

"It was for many," Troutfin spoke, sighing. "Living in SnowClan will not be the same as RiverClan, but I'm willing to deal with it for now. I'm sure you two will have a better time. At least you have each other and some kits on the way. I have no one."

"We're here too," Flamepaw reminded her. "And even if RiverClan is gone, we're still clanmates by heart. You're not completely alone."

Troutfin smiled weakly, but it was obvious losing SnowClan had a devastating effect on her as well.

"Barkpaw, Flamepaw, Smokestar wants you," Cloudfur called from behind them.

Flamepaw smiled weakly at Troutfin and followed Cloudfur toward the rock where Smokestar stood, eagerly awaiting them. Flamepaw excitedly trotted up the rock and joined Smokestar, Barkpaw following behind her.

"ALL CATS OLD ENOUGH TO CATCH THEIR OWN PREY, JOIN BENEATH THE ROCK FOR A CLAN MEETING!" Smokestar yowled.

Within moments, it seemed the entirety of SnowClan had gathered together, all staring up at Flamepaw and Barkpaw with widened eyes.

"We are fortunate to welcome two new members in our clan. They, like Troutfin, were former RiverClan members that suffered from Swampstar's rule. It is in our hospitality, therefore, to welcome and accept them to our clan. Due to their clan's demise, Flamepaw and Barkpaw were unable to receive their warrior names, so it is now that I give it to them on behalf of their former leader." There was a pause, and then Smokestar continued. "I call upon my warrior ancestors to look upon these two apprentices. They have trained hard and traveled far and wide to answer your call, and I grant them to you as warriors in return. Flamepaw," he said, turning to her.

Flamepaw stared at the elderly leader, waiting for him to speak.

"Do you promise to uphold the warrior code your entire life, even if it means death?"

"I do," Flamepaw spoke firmly.

"Then, by the power of StarClan, I name you--"

"Wait!" Flamepaw suddenly shouted anxiously. There was a pause as Smokestar turned to her and glanced at her curiously. A sudden thought had occurred to Flamepaw, and she cleared her throat and spoke nervously.

"If it is not too much to ask, Smokestar, may I choose my own warrior name?"

"Of course," Smokestar agreed.

"I would like to be called Flameclaw," she said. She grinned at this name, choosing the ending in remembrance of Clawkit, the innocent kit whom Korosu had slaughtered. He was only but one of the cats Flamepaw couldn't save, but he had been the most innocent and had such a long life ahead of him. She glanced at Barkpaw, and he smiled, having heard her stories of the quest before his arrival.

"Barkpaw," Smokestar said, turning toward her mate. "Do you promise to uphold the warrior code with your life, even if it means death?"

"I do," Barkpaw agreed.

"Would you like to choose your warrior name as well?"

Barkpaw paused for a moment, then nodded. "I'd like to be called Barkfern," he decided. "In honor of my sister."

Flamepaw smiled weakly at him, remembering his tale of the two sisters he had left behind in LightningClan. He had told her often that he suspected they were no longer alive and had perished shortly after his departure.

"Then, by the power of StarClan, I name these two new SnowClan warriors Flameclaw and Barkfern," Smokestar spoke.

"FLAMECLAW! BARKFERN!" the clan cheered wildly.

Flameclaw's spirits lifted up in absolute joy. She had imagined this day for many moons, and even though it was not occurring in RiverClan, she still felt absolute and incredibly joy coming from the occasion.

Flameclaw glanced into the crowd, her eyes fixated on her new clan members. Despite the loss of RiverClan, she could tell by their warm and eager faces that SnowClan would prove to be a lovely new home.

Chapter 27

After the ceremony had ended, Flameclaw was led by Smokestar to the medicine cat den to meet the medicine cat and apprentice who would be caring for her for the remainder of her pregnancy. Smokestar paused at the entrance of the den and smiled.

"We have very kind medicine cats here. I hope you'll like them," he told her.

"I hope so, too," Flameclaw replied.

Smokestar then entered the den, Flameclaw following behind. Inside was a cream colored she-cat organizing herbs. Next to her was a calico she-cat, apprentice age, who seemed to be helping to pull a thorn out of another apprentice's paw.

"Spottedmask, there's someone I'd like you to meet," Smokestar called.

The cream she-cat turned her gaze toward Flameclaw and smiled warmly.

"You must be Flameclaw," she said, approaching her. It only took one glance at Flameclaw for the medicine cat to remark on her pregnancy.

"And my, aren't you pregnant! These kits will be due soon," Spottedmask remarked.

Flameclaw nodded.

"Is it all right if I leave her here with you?" Smokestar asked. "I've got some business to attend to."

"Not at all. I'll see her to the nursery myself."

"Thank you. Good luck, Flameclaw," Smokestar said. The spotted tom waved good-bye and exited, leaving Flameclaw alone in the medicine cat den.

"Well, I'm Spottedmask," the she-cat explained. "And the calico over there is my apprentice, Tawnypaw."

"Hello!" Tawnypaw squeaked. She seemed to be almost complete with her work.

"Hello. Nice to meet you," Flameclaw replied. The two seemed to be very nice, but her heart throbbed slightly, wishing it was Mothwing here with her and not an unknown she-cat.

"Is it all right if I inspect you briefly?" Spottedmask asked.

Flameclaw nodded, standing awkwardly as Spottedmask gazed at her swollen belly, poking at it slightly.

"I'd say these kits will be due in less than a half moon," she announced.

"How many are there?" Flameclaw wondered.

"It is hard to tell now," Spottedmask replied. "But I would say there is definitely more than one."
Flameclaw nodded, remembering how Mothwing had told her the same.

"Is that tom who came with you the father?" Tawnypaw asked as the wounded apprentice finally left the den.

Flameclaw nodded, blushing slightly.

"Well, I do hope you'll like it here in SnowClan. Your kits will receive proper care, I assure you."

"That's good to hear," Flameclaw replied.

"It's good you came here before the kits were born. I'll be giving you some herbs to eat to help you make milk," Spottedmask said. She fished through some herbs and handed some to Flameclaw. "And it's

best you start now."

Flameclaw nodded and did her best to eat the bitter herb.

"You better get used to that flavor. There will be more," Spottedmask advised her after noticing the disgust on Flameclaw's face.

"I'll get by," Flameclaw promised.

"Good. Now, Tawnypaw, can you take her to the nursery? I believe they've already been told that a new nest needs to be placed there."

The calico seemed delighted with this request and nodded her head vigorously.

"This way, Flameclaw," she called, leading Flameclaw out of the medicine cat den. The nursery was conveniently located next door, and Flameclaw nervously entered, knowing that she'd be in the company of these queens and their kits for the next several moons.

"Everyone, this is Flameclaw, the new SnowClan member. Her kits are due soon!" Tawnypaw exclaimed.

Flameclaw entered and was surprised to see the nursery occupied mostly by pregnant queens. There were five others in total and only three kits. Flameclaw wondered if perhaps they'd all be due at the same time.

"We've made a nest for you right here," a light ginger she-cat purred. She was fairly pregnant as well.

"Thank you," Flameclaw said, slowly heading toward the empty nest in the corner of the room.

"I'll let you all get acquainted," Tawnypaw decided, exiting the den.

Flameclaw settled down and watched as all eyes were turned toward her. There was a brief bit of silence, and the ginger she-cat that had led her to her nest was the first to speak.

"My name is Dovewing," she said. "I'm the deputy, Cloudfur's, mate."

"Oh, yes, I know Cloudfur," Flameclaw said, recalling the white tom. Dovewing seemed to be one of the older she-cats in the nursery, and Flameclaw wondered if this wasn't her first litter.

"And I'm Wavestorm," a silver-blue she-cat spoke up. Flameclaw glanced at her and noticed she had no kits near her and appeared not to be pregnant at all.

"Wavestorm is a permanent queen," Dovewing explained, noticing Flameclaw's confusion.

"My second litter just became apprentices, and I felt that I enjoyed helping with kits more than being a warrior," Wavestorm explained.

Flameclaw nodded, but she did not agree with this idea. She would rather be a warrior than be confined to the walls of the nursery. Still, she had not had her kits yet, so maybe this would change.

"I'm Applewhisker," a calico she-cat spoke up. She appeared to be the oldest she-cat out of the others, but she was the only one with three kits by her side. Only one appeared to be calico like her while the two others had mucky, brown colored pelts.

"And these are my kits," she explained. "The two toms with the brown pelts are Pinekit and Marshkit, and the little calico she-cat is Honeykit."

"I can't wait to get more kits to play with!" Honeykit exclaimed.

Pinekit nodded vigorously beside her. "We've been lonely since the others left."

"You'll have playmates soon enough," Applewhisker purred.

"And I'm Emberleg," a dark ginger tabby spoke up. She too appeared to be heavily pregnant.
"And I'm Moonstream," said the last. She was a calico like Applewhisker, though she didn't look very pregnant. It seemed like her kits would not be due for a while.

"Well, it was very nice to meet you all," Flameclaw said, glancing around at the bunch. "I hope SnowClan will be a great place to

live."

"Of course it is!" Wavestorm exclaimed, throwing her tail up into the air.

Flameclaw could already tell that Wavestorm seemed to be disliked by the others due to her annoying comments. She'd have to ask Dovewing about her later.

"We are very glad to have you," Dovewing purred.

"When are your kits due?" Applewhisker asked.

"Very shortly."

"It must've been difficult traveling here," Dovewing observed.

Flameclaw nodded. "Yes, but I'm glad we got here before the kits were due."

A cough sounded at the entrance, and Flameclaw glanced up to notice Barkfern. She immediately stood up, exclaiming, "Barkfern!"

He ran towards her and nuzzled her slightly.

"How are you? What did the medicine cat say?" he asked.

"I'm fine," she assured him. "The kits will be due in less than half a moon. But she's been giving me herbs to help with the pregnancy. It'll be fine. I just finished getting acquainted with the other queens."

"Oh, hello," Barkfern said, turning to face the others. Apparently he'd been so caught up in Flameclaw that he hadn't realized they weren't the only ones in the den.

"Is this your mate?" Wavestorm asked.

Flameclaw nodded.

"Nice to meet you," Dovewing said.

"How are things going with you?" Flameclaw asked quietly, trying

not to disturb the others.
"Good. Cloudfur's sending me on evening patrol already. It'll feel great to be a part of a clan again!"

Flameclaw nodded, though sadness panged her. She desperately wanted to go on a patrol of her own if only she wasn't confined to the nursery. But she knew these thoughts would be replaced when she realized the joy of having kits. Still, it would be a while before she would be able to fulfill normal warrior duties.

"Well, I better be off, but we can share a squirrel when I get back," Barkfern promised.

Flameclaw nodded and waved good-bye, hoping he'd visit often. She then turned her gaze back to the others and smiled weakly, hoping she'd be accepted as a SnowClan member soon enough.

Chapter 28

Flameclaw opened her eyes, revealing the walls of the SnowClan nursery. She let out a large yawn and slowly stretched, her swollen stomach brushing against her nest. She had been in SnowClan several sunrises now and knew her kits would be due anyday.

She had been having nearly daily check-ups with Spottedmask now, and the medicine cat had advised her that it was best if she didn't stray too far from the nursery as her kits might be due at any moment. In the meantime, Flameclaw had also been eating countless herbs to help her milk come.

The other queens seemed excited that Flameclaw's kits were to be born soon, while Applewhisker's three kits seemed filled with joy. They longed for some playmates in the nursery it seemed.

Flameclaw had found herself growing somewhat closer to the other SnowClan queens, though she still didn't feel fully involved in the clan. Barkfern would come and visit her often, telling her of how great patrols were and telling stories about magnificent prey and boundary intruders.

Flameclaw enjoyed hearing his stories, but they made her long to be a warrior. She was a bit upset that she had finally received her warrior name, only to be confined to the nursery. But she did want her kits, and she knew that she would move to the warriors' den once her kits were born.

The other queens were already stirring, and Applewhisker's kits seemed to be chatting away at their mother. The calico queen snapped at them and told them not to disturb the others, at last taking them outside.

Flameclaw smiled and laughed slightly, anticipating the day she would be doing the same. Moonstream was called into the medicine cat den by Tawnypaw for an inspection while Wavestorm left to go get some prey.

Soon, Dovewing had risen, and she turned, smiling at Flameclaw.

"Maybe today will be the day," she purred, implying Flameclaw's kits would be born soon.
"Perhaps," Flameclaw replied, desperate to get the kits out of her.

"It will be exciting having kits," Dovewing told her.

"Have you had any litters before?" Flameclaw wondered.

Dovewing shook her head and blushed, seeming a bit embarrassed.

"No, this is my first litter. I know I'm not the youngest she-cat here, but I'm sure I'll be a good mother just the same," the ginger she-cat mewed.

"I'm sure you will," Flameclaw replied. Out of all the queens in the nursery, she found she was the closet to Dovewing, despite their age difference. Dovewing was talkative and kind though, and she always made Flameclaw feel welcome. She had even spilled dirt about some of the cats-even Wavestorm.

Unfortunately, Flameclaw and Dovewing's conversation was interrupted by Tawnypaw's presence. Moonstream stepped back inside the nursery while Tawnypaw's gaze fell on Flameclaw.

"If you could follow me to the medicine cat den," she said.

Flameclaw nodded and stood, waving good-bye to Dovewing. She then followed the calico apprentice into the medicine cat den where Spottedmask was busy arranging herbs. Upon Flameclaw's entrance, the she-cat glanced up and smiled.

"Flameclaw, good to see you," she said.

"Hello."

Spottedmask approached her and inspected her some, biting her lip.

"Everything okay?" Flameclaw asked.

"Oh, yes. Your kits should be due at anytime. Perhaps it's best I

bring you your herbs to the nursery now."

"I can't even leave the den?" she wondered.

"I wouldn't advise it unless you want to give birth in the middle of the camp," Spottedmask joked. "It's just that it'll be difficult to move you if you go into labor."

"Oh, I see," Flameclaw said.

"Take these herbs, and try to stay in the nursery from now on. Soon, you'll have some lovely kits to look after," she assured her.

"Thank you, Spottedmask," Flameclaw replied, taking the herbs and walking back to the nursery, her belly swelling beneath her. She somehow got down the bitter herbs and unpatiently sat in her nest, wondering what to do. Dovewing had gone out to share a squirrel with Cloudfur, leaving her confined in the nursery.

In a way, she almost wanted her kits to come now so at least she'd be busy caring for them.

"Hey," came a voice from the outside of the nursery.

Flameclaw glanced up, glad to see Barkfern.

"Hey, come in!" she called.

"You don't want to share a squirrel outside?" he asked.

"Spottedmask has confined me to the nursery until the kits are born," she explained.

"Oh, I see," Barkfern replied, laying down next to his mate. He licked her ear and smiled warmly at her. Flameclaw smiled, warmth spreading through her body.

"I wish I could get outside though," Flameclaw sighed.

"Eh, it's not that great out there anyway," Barkfern said in an attempt to cheer her up, but Flameclaw could tell it was where he'd rather be.

"Are you nervous to become a father?" she asked.

"Of course. But we're in SnowClan now, and I'm sure our kits will be fine. If you had given birth on the journey here...well, I don't know what I would've done," he confessed.

"Me either," Flameclaw replied.

"So they'll be due any day?" he asked.

Flameclaw nodded.

"How many do you think there will be?" he wondered.

"Six," Flameclaw joked.

Barkfern gasped and laughed. "If I were to be a father to six kits at once..."

Flameclaw laughed too. "Well, hopefully not more than three."

"Will they be all toms, or all she-cats, or maybe a mixture of both?"

"How should I know?" Flameclaw replied, laughing.

"Do you want toms or she-cats?" he asked.

"I want whatever kits StarClan has blessed me with," she purred.

Barkfern smiled. "You will make a wonderful mother."

Flameclaw blushed slightly. "And you will make a wonderful father. I hope our kits will do well in SnowClan."

"Of course they will. All of the others are so friendly, and I've already grown acquainted with lots of them."

Flameclaw frowned slightly, not having done the same. Barkfern noticed her ill expression and stared at her.

"Hey, soon you'll meet all of them too. And once your kits are born, I'm sure many will come to the nursery to see them. It'll be okay," he promised.

"Sometimes I just really miss RiverClan," Flameclaw confessed. What she would give to be in the RiverClan nursery right now.

"Me too, but there was nothing left there. This was a good decision, Flameclaw. I wouldn't want to be a rogue the rest of my life. We're too much like clan cats," he explained.

Flameclaw nodded, knowing he was right. They sat and chatted a little while longer until Barkfern was called for patrol.

"Time to go?" she asked.

Barkfern nodded. "I'll be back to visit you soon though," he promised. He nuzzled her and then left the nursery, leaving Flameclaw behind.

Flameclaw sighed and rested her head on her paws, awaiting for the day her kits would finally arrive.

Chapter 29

Flameclaw opened her eyes to find the sun just beginning to rise. Outside, it was still mostly dark, and cats were fast asleep. Flameclaw glanced around, confused as to why she had woken up. She was generally good at sleeping in with the rest of the cats.

She sighed and rested her head on her paws, glancing outside. The sky was just beginning to become streaked with orange. She wondered when morning patrol would head out.

Though she tried, she found she was unable to fall asleep. She frowned and was restless trying to get comfortable, but it seemed it was no use. She just couldn't fall back to sleep no matter how hard she tried.

Flameclaw slowly attempted to sit up when pain shot down her entire body. She let out a yowl in surprise and laid back down, pain beginning to spread throughout her entire body. She knew exactly what pain this was—her kits were on the way. She shut her eyes and winced as pain spread throughout her, watching as the other queens began to wake.

"Flameclaw, Flameclaw," came Dovewing's gentle mew. "Are you okay?"

Flameclaw attempted to speak up, but pain kept her from speaking.

"By StarClan! Her kits are coming!" Wavestorm exclaimed.

Flameclaw nodded weakly and let out another yowl of pain. Wavestorm immediately rushed off to the medicine cat den while Dovewing sat by Flameclaw's side until Spottedmask and Tawnypaw came rushing in.

"Finally!" Spottedmask exclaimed. "I was hoping they'd be due soon."

"Where's Barkfern?" Flameclaw managed to ask weakly.

"Tawnypaw, go fetch her mate," Spottedmask snapped.

Flameclaw again cried out while Spottedmask shoved a stick toward her.

"I need you to hold onto this when the pain comes," she instructed.

Flameclaw nodded her head, praying the pain would pass soon. Within a few moments, Barkfern had appeared at the entrance, his fur wild and his eyes widened. It appeared he had still been asleep.

"Flameclaw!" he exclaimed, rushing to her side.

"Not too close. I still need to work with her," Spottedmask explained.

"Yes, yes, of course," he replied, standing back some. Flameclaw desperately wanted him to be right by her side though.

The other queens exited the nursery to give Spottedmask some space. Flameclaw was glad that Barkfern was allowed to stay though. She couldn't imagine giving birth without him there. Another ripple of pain shot through Flameclaw, and she let out a yowl.

"The stick!" Spottedmask instructed.

Flameclaw nodded and bit down the stick, her teeth pressing down into it as more pain ran throughout her body. She had never been in so much pain in her life, not even when she'd been injured on her journeys.

Suddenly, she let out a gasp of relief as the first kit slid onto the moss. Flameclaw, still in shock from pain, glanced over, seeing it was a gray tabby.

"A she-cat!" Tawnypaw announced happily.

Flameclaw smiled weakly before more pain overtook her.

Please don't let me have five kits, she prayed to StarClan.

But the pain wasn't as bad, and within a few minutes, a second kit had been born with the same ginger fur as Flameclaw's.

"A tom!" Tawnypaw announced.

Flameclaw glanced over at Barkfern and watched as he smiled happily.

Spottedmask felt Flameclaw's stomach as another burst of pain overtook her.

"There's one more," she announced.

Flameclaw nodded, biting down on the stick one last time as the last kit was born. A white bundle of fur slid out onto the moss, and Tawnypaw eagerly announced, "Another she-cat!"
The pain soon began to subside, and Spottedmask felt Flameclaw's stomach one last time.

"You're done," she told her. "Congrats, Flameclaw. You did great."

Flameclaw smiled weakly as the kits were pushed toward her and began to suckle. Barkfern rejoined her side, and Spottedmask and Tawnypaw, seeing that this was a more personal moment, left them alone in the den.

"They're beautiful," Barkfern observed, glancing at his three kits.

Flameclaw smiled, glancing down at them as well. "I think so, too. I couldn't have asked for more lovely looking kits."

"None of them seem to have picked up my brown pelt though," he joked.

Flameclaw laughed slightly, glancing down at her two daughters and son.

"Should we name them?" Barkfern asked.

Flameclaw nodded, glancing first at the gray tabby she-cat. Her fur

was a light gray, streaked with darker stripes. Like Flameclaw, she too had a white chest and paws.

Flameclaw smiled at her daughter, pondering what to call her. She searched her mind for names, then smiled, landing on one.

"How about Daisykit?" she suggested, thinking back to Daisyflower, the she-cat she still felt guilty over. Daisyflower's dead body still haunted Flameclaw's thoughts, but now, she could be a little at ease. She thought it was fitting to name her daughter after such a brave warrior.

"I like that name," Barkfern purred.

He turned his attention to the white she-cat.

"You know, she reminds me of my sister, Snowpaw," he said.

"Then why not name her Snowkit?" Flameclaw suggested.

"Is that all right with you?" Barkfern asked.

Flameclaw nodded.

"Snowkit it is," he decided, watching as the young she-cat squirmed slightly.

Last was the ginger tom who resembled Flameclaw the most, though his chest and paws lacked the white that Flameclaw had. She thought for a few moments, then turned to Barkfern.

"I'd like to call him Goldkit...after Goldstar," she explained.

Barkfern nodded. "I think that's fitting."

Flameclaw smiled, glad to have named her son after such a valiant leader. She only hoped he could possess the same qualities that the leader of RiverClan had.

Barkfern and Flameclaw stayed next to each other for a little while, staring at the new kits they would be watching over. Flameclaw knew there would be many difficulties along the way, but there was

nothing she and Barkfern couldn't handle. In fact, she had no doubt at all that they would prove to be excellent parents.

Chapter 30

"Wake up, Momma," came a quiet whisper beside Flameclaw's ear.

"You can't say it that quietly," came another voice.

"Well, how should I wake her up then?" the other retorted.

"MOMMA, WAKE UP!" the other shouted loudly.

Flameclaw awoke with a jolt to find her son, Goldkit, staring at her, proudly smiling. It had been his voice no doubt that had screeched into her ear. Daisykit stood beside him, seeming a bit embarrassed. Snowkit still lay asleep by Flameclaw's side like the perfect angel she was.

"Finally, you're up!" Goldkit exclaimed.

Flameclaw let out a little grunt and stretched out her paws, careful not to disturb Snowkit.

"And why do you need me up so badly?" she asked, morning light shining into the nursery. Some of the other queens were still sleeping, and Flameclaw hoped her ignorant kits had not woken them.

"We want to play!" Daisykit whimpered.

"Why didn't you, then?" Flameclaw wondered.

"Because we want to go outside!" Goldkit exclaimed.

Flameclaw let out a groan. As much as she loved her kits, they were a bit rambunctious at times. While they were not even a moon old, she was already looking forward to their apprentice ceremony.

"Well, as soon as Snowkit wakes up, we can go outside," she promised.

"Ugh," Goldkit groaned.

"Snowkit, wake up," Daisykit said, padding to her sister's side. She pushed on her sister's pale flank.

"Daisykit, leave her be," Flameclaw snapped.

Snowkit's eyes opened to reveal her emerald green eyes. She let out a groan and squinted her eyes against the morning light.

"Come on, Snowkit. Momma is going to take us outside to play!" Goldkit exclaimed.

Snowkit slowly rose to her feet and let out a low yawn.

"Why don't I ever get to sleep?" she complained.

"Let's go outside now. We don't want to disturb any of the other queens," Flameclaw advised.

She slowly led the kits outside into the lively SnowClan camp. She watched as their eyes lit up with excitement as they noticed all the other cats chatting, being assigned on patrol, and sharing prey.

"I want to be an apprentice soon!" Daisykit exclaimed.

Flameclaw chuckled slightly. "You still have many more moons to go, Daisykit. I know it can be hard. When I was a kit, all I wanted was to get out of the nursery and be an apprentice."

"In RiverClan?" Snowkit asked.

The kits were aware that both Flameclaw and Barkfern had not been born in SnowClan. While they sometimes asked Barkfern about RiverClan, many times they asked Flameclaw, wishing to know more about her mysterious old clan.

"Yes, in RiverClan," Flameclaw purred. "Except many of the kits were older than me, and I had no siblings to play with. My best friend, Mothwing, went on to become a medicine cat apprentice. I was very lonely."

"I feel like that with Applewhisker's kits," Goldkit admitted. "They're so much older than us."

"You'll have new playmates soon," Flameclaw promised. Many of the queens were to be giving birth within days.

"I hope so," Daisykit replied.

"Let's play!" Goldkit exclaimed.

Flameclaw took a seat and watched as her kits planned out a game to play.

"I want to be leader!" Goldkit exclaimed.

"You were leader last time," Snowkit pointed out.

"Yeah, and I was deputy, so I think I should be leader now," Daisykit argued.

Flameclaw laughed quietly as they argued on who was who. Eventually, Daisykit ended up becoming leader with Snowkit as her deputy while Goldkit was the leader of a NightClan, a clan that adjoined borders with SnowClan.

She watched as the three tumbled about and laughed softly. Her kits had a lot of energy and emotion. She had been happy watching them grow over the past moon. She observed each of her kits, noticing how Goldkit looked so much like her with the same ginger pelt and green eyes. Daisykit's eyes, however, were a bright blue, perhaps from Barkfern's side, though Barkfern's eyes were green as well.

She watched Snowkit run about, admiring her dazzling coat. She had never imagined any of her kits to be born pure white.

Flameclaw let out sigh, imagining her kits playing in the RiverClan camp instead. Goldstar would chuckle lightly and continue on assigning patrols, her parents would happily watch and try to determine which kit looked the most like them. Mothwing would constantly check up on them to make sure their health was well.

Flameclaw knew this would never be, but a part of her heart longed for this possibility. She wondered how Mothwing was getting on, hoping she was doing well out in the forest.

"Well, what are you up to?" came a voice behind her.

Flameclaw spun around, smiling softly. Barkfern stood behind her.

"Hey," she mewed.

"Hey," Barkfern replied, sitting down next to her. He focused his attention on the kits and laughed slightly.

"Playing games?" he asked.

"Oh, yes," Flameclaw relied. "Daisystar and Snowpelt of SnowClan are fighting against the evil Goldstar of NightClan."

"Sounds exciting," Barkfern noted.

"Oh, very," Flameclaw responded. "I was saving the other queens from their annoyance this morning."

"They wake you up again?"

"I really appreciated Goldkit screaming into my ear," Flameclaw said.

Barkfern chuckled. "He's just a rambunctious kit, that's all," he said, turning his gaze toward his only son. He then looked back at Flameclaw. "Do you think they'll let me break up their game to speak to them?"

Flameclaw nodded.

She watched as Barkfern spoke up and the kits paused, rushing toward their father and screeching with delight. Flameclaw smiled, glad the kits liked Barkfern so much. The two had been nervous to become a mother and father, but their kits were very close to them, and they all loved each other so.

Barkfern often visited the nursery and the kits, even when he had

patrols. Flameclaw was glad he did so. She recalled back to her days a kit when it felt like her father was too busy to see her. Of course, she loved him either way, but she had missed him greatly during her time in the nursery.

Barkfern stuck around a little while longer before warrior duties called him elsewhere. He told Flameclaw and the kits good-bye and went off, waving good-bye with his striped tail. The kits waved back, shouting for Barkfern to visit soon. When he was gone, Flameclaw noticed the kits appeared to be tired after a morning of playing.

"Let's head back inside the nursery," she suggested. "Then, later, we can gather some new moss for your nests."

The kits agreed and happily padded inside. Flameclaw took one last glance back at the SnowClan camp before entering the den. She smiled weakly, knowing one day she'd be a warrior with Barkfern. But for now, she turned her attention back to her kits and smiled, settling down next to them in the nursery.

Her heart warmed as they curled up beside her, burying their heads into her fur. She leaned down and licked the head of each one of her kits then placed her head down beside theirs, feeling their chests move up and down against hers.

"I love you, little ones," she whispered.

Chapter 31

It had been a few moons since the birth of Flameclaw's kits, and each day they were growing stronger and gaining more personality. Applewhisker's kits had moved out of the nursery, but thankfully, a new queen had moved in and had given birth to three kits, which made perfect playmates for Flameclaw's.

Barkfern came to visit often, though the kits did not seem to need him as much anymore now that they had found their new playmates. Even Flameclaw felt that she did not need to be watching them as diligently anymore. In a few moons, they would become apprentices, and she'd be a warrior. Her paws tingled just thinking of the idea.

With each passing day, Flameclaw grew more accustomed to SnowClan and felt like everyone had invited her in and had accepted her as a true member. Her kits seemed to be SnowClan through and through (though they possessed no SnowClan blood).

There were days, however, that Flameclaw grew depressed and longed to be back in RiverClan with her old clan members. She had grown fond of some SnowClan cats, but it would never replace the relationships she'd had in RiverClan.

Her kits' constant need to hear stories of RiverClan saddened her at times as well. Recalling the memories was always joyful, but as soon as the story ended, Flameclaw was left with a sense of disappointment that these memories would never take place again.

One morning, Flameclaw opened her eyes to find Daisykit's eyes peering into hers. Flameclaw let out a quiet shriek and sat up immediately. Daisykit let out a laugh and tumbled to the floor in laughter.

"You should've seen your face, Momma!" she shouted. Goldkit and

Snowkit were giggling with her.

Flameclaw rolled her eyes and gently nudged her daughter.

"It's not polite to wake cats up that way, you know," she warned. "I hope you haven't been doing that to any of the other queens."

"No. Just you," Goldkit assured her, though his snickering convinced Flameclaw otherwise.
She slowly laid back down though sat back up when Daisykit began to shout.

"No, Momma, stay up!" Daisykit urged.

"Why? You've just woken me up from a nice nap," Flameclaw complained.

"We want to go outside with Cloudkit, Hazelkit, and Ripplekit, but their mother is asleep, and the other queens said we couldn't go out alone," Snowkit explained.

"They didn't offer to watch?" Flameclaw wondered.

"No. They said to ask you," Goldkit added.

Flameclaw sighed. Sometimes she wondered why the other queens needed to constantly rule the nursery. Wavestorm didn't even have kits. Why couldn't she have offered to watch them?

"Fine. Let's go outside," she said.

The three squeaked and ran to grab their friends. Flameclaw led her kits outside with the other three following behind. They immediately jumped into their games--fighting battles and tossing moss-balls, and such like that.

Flameclaw watched the other three kits play. They, too, were not of SnowClan blood, but they got along well with her three. There were three of them—Hazelkit, Cloudkit, and Ripplekit. Two toms and one she-cat. She was glad that Goldkit could finally play with some other toms besides his two sisters.

Hazelkit was the only she-cat, and she had a brown tabby pelt. Cloudkit was the largest out of the bunch—a pure white tom whose pelt was just a shade lighter than Snowkit's. Ripplekit was the second largest, another tom, and, like Daisykit, he had a gray tabby pelt, though his seemed lighter than Daisykit's.

Flameclaw watched them play and was glad to find her kits had some other playmates. It was difficult for them to play with Applewhisker's kits since they were so big. But these kits had been born shortly after her own, and they got along well. Flameclaw could already tell they'd form great friendships. She was glad they'd all be able to train together.

Flameclaw sighed, recalling her life in RiverClan. She had practically no friends in the nursery, and Mothwing was much older than her and had become medicine cat apprentice. She was glad her kits would not have to suffer through that.

"Toss it over here!" she heard Snowkit shout as Cloudkit tossed a ball of moss toward her. Snowkit leapt into the air and caught it with her mouth, landing proudly.

"Let me try!" Goldkit interposed.

Flameclaw giggled as he leapt in the air to perform the same maneuver but missed the ball miserably. Hazelkit giggled at him excessively.

"Hey, stop laughing!" he shouted at her, clearly upset. "I-I wasn't ready!"

"Really? You seemed so sure," she teased.

Goldkit nudged her lightly and the two began to tumble around. The others soon joined in, turning it into an all-kitten battle.

Flameclaw knew one day she'd miss seeing her kits act this way, even if she did desperately want to start performing warrior duties. She thought to the future of when her kits would be apprentices and then warriors. Perhaps some day they'd even have mates and kits of their own.

But it seems so far away, she thought.

She, herself, had thought of how much time had passed. She believed herself to be much older than she really was. In actuality, Flameclaw was only about twenty-eight moons, much younger than most of the queens, but she felt her journeys had added on much more moons.

Her kits played for a little while longer until Daisykit came running to her excitedly with the others.

"Can you tell us a story?" Daisykit begged.

"Oh, yes! We want to hear one!" Ripplekit squeaked.

Flameclaw had been telling her kits stories for moons, but only recently had the other litter from the nursery come to hear them too. Flameclaw felt like an elder, almost, telling stories to the young kits. Once, she had even advised her kits to go to the elders' den to hear some stories, but they had returned quickly explaining that no elder had as good of stories as her.

"Which do you want to hear?" Flameclaw asked.

"A new one!" Goldkit exclaimed.

Flameclaw paused.

"Did I ever tell you of the time Rosepettle and I invaded a twoleg neighborhood?" she asked.

Her kits shook their heads vigorously.

"I had just started my quest to go look for Goldstar. Rosepettle had tagged along with me, and we first decided to head to the two-leg neighborhood. We came to this quaint garden with pretty flowers and trees. Then, we heard yowls, and three kittypets surrounded us!"

"What did you do?" Hazelkit gasped.

"We did what any warrior would do! We fought them!" Flameclaw

exclaimed. The kits squealed with delight. It seemed like being a warrior was the only thing on their mind.

"Of course, I stopped the fighting to tell them we meant no harm. We asked about Goldstar, but they claimed they hadn't seen her. We were about to leave when one kittypet asked to join us."

"It was Spotteddusk, right?" Snowkit wondered, having heard of the tom before.

"Yes, but his name was Neko then. And Rosepettle didn't like him that much either at that time. She didn't even want him to join," Flameclaw explained.

"But later they became mates," Goldkit told the others.

"That's right," Flameclaw said, smiling slightly. An image flashed in her mind of Spotteddusk attempting to hold up Rosepettle's weak and dying body in the battle. She shook her head, trying to clear her mind of the memory.

"Are they still mates?" Daisykit asked.

"Of course," Flameclaw told her, neglecting to tell her kits that they were most likely united in StarClan as mates at this point in time. She knew in the battle that Rosepettle would perish. As for Spotteddusk, she wasn't sure, but his one remaining eye pierced her brain.

"Can we visit them sometime?" Snowkit wondered.

Flameclaw chuckled lightly. "Oh, but they live much too far away."

"How far?" Goldkit wondered.

"Oh, you'd have to travel years and years to get there."

"Longer than a moon?" Snowkit asked.

"Much, *much* longer than a moon," Flameclaw replied. "Are you kits tired? Perhaps it's best you head inside for a nap."

Daisykit let out a yawn, the others soon following. Hazelkit, Cloudkit, and Ripplekit returned to their mother while Flameclaw tucked all her kits into their nests and made sure they were comfortable.

As they went off to sleep, Daisykit murmured, "I wish I could meet Rosepettle and Spotteddusk someday."

"Someday you will," Flameclaw whispered, watching as Daisykit closed her eyes and drifted to sleep. "And someday I will, too."

Chapter 32

More moons had passed since Flameclaw's kits had entered the world, and now, they would be apprentices within a matter of sunrises. It warmed Flameclaw's heart to have watched them grow in that time.

No longer were they the tiny kits that constantly relied on their mother, but now they were older, bigger, and capable of taking care of themselves. Flameclaw would miss the tiny kits she had once slept close too though. Now, they could all no longer fit in Flameclaw's nest!

She knew the kits were becoming excited about their approaching ceremony. Flameclaw recalled her days as a kit in RiverClan when she anxiously awaited becoming an apprentice. She was glad that her kits' friends would join them shortly. Flameclaw had few friends in her short time as an apprentice. She had gone on the quest very early into apprenticehood, and once she returned, she and Barkfern remained close.

Flameclaw was secretly glad though to relinquish her position as a queen. She could not understand how some she-cats wanted to remain a queen for life. Many more queens had moved into the nursery since the birth of her kits, and now, there were several kits running around the nursery and causing a ruckus. She knew the other queens did their best to silence their young, but with so many kits around, it was impossible to control them all. One she-cat had just recently given birth to five kits! Flameclaw had no idea how the she-cat could handle that many.

During one morning, Flameclaw sat out in front of the nursery, bathing her fur in the sunlight. Her kits were scampering around with Ripplekit, Cloudkit, and Hazelkit again, like they normally did. She had watched the kits grow very close to the other litter and was pleased to see them form such strong friendships. She knew without

a doubt that they would hold these friendships for the rest of their lives. Perhaps some of them might even become mates with each other in the far future.

As they played, Flameclaw heard someone clear his throat and turned to the side to find Barkfern staring lovingly at her. Flameclaw purred and patted the ground beside her with her tail, inviting Barkfern to sit with her.

Her mate sat down and purred, his fur brushing against Flameclaw's.

"I see the kits are playing again," he noted.

Flameclaw nodded, her eyes still focused on the kits. She knew they could most likely be trusted not to cause trouble now, but she still wanted to be sure. In a few sunrises, they would no longer be her responsibility anymore.

"I sometimes miss when they'd let us join in their games," Barkfern admitted.

Flameclaw shrugged. "It's good to see them grow. They won't have much longer to play. They'll be performing apprentice duties in a matter of sunrises."

Barkfern nodded, though he remained silent. After a long pause, he finally spoke up again.
"I sometimes miss the days that they were young," he recalled.

Flameclaw snorted.

"When they were only a few moons old they nagged me constantly."

"I guess I didn't have to deal with them as much as you," Barkfern realized.

"No."

"You don't feel like I neglected you at all during this time, right?"

"No!" Flameclaw exclaimed quickly. Barkfern had been incredibly

supportive during Flameclaw's time in the nursery. He would visit often, at least once a day, even if just to visit Flameclaw. He had been an excellent father to the kits and had spent more time with them than Flameclaw's father had ever spent with her.

"Oh, good. I was worried."

"Well, soon we'll have each other's constant company again," Flameclaw reminded him.

"I can't wait to have you as a warrior with me. Hopefully Smokestar will put us on similar patrols."

"I hope so, too. It's getting a tad crowded in that nursery. I'll be glad to finally sleep in a den where I'm not in constant fear of kits playing tricks on me in the early morning," Flameclaw explained. Barkfern laughed lightly, placing his gaze on the kits again.

"Is this what you wanted?" he asked.

"What do you mean?"

"I mean, this life—with me, the kits, in SnowClan. I know the kits weren't exactly planned. Would-would you have chosen differently if it weren't the case?" Barkfern asked.

Flameclaw pondered for a moment.

"No. I would still have joined a clan, even if I weren't expecting kits. RiverClan would still be gone. And even though I had kits early on in my warrior life, I still would've wanted them eventually," Flameclaw explained.

"Would you ever have another litter?" Barkfern asked.

Flameclaw chuckled. "Slow down, there! One litter is enough for me right now. If I did, it'd be long into the future."

Barkfern laughed slightly too. "These three seem to be enough to handle anyway."

"Hey, Barkfern's here!" Snowkit exclaimed.

The kits glanced over at their father and came running. Barkfern grinned and embraced each of them.

"Are you three ready for your upcoming apprentice ceremony?" he asked.

"You bet! I'm going to be the greatest SnowClan warrior that ever lived!" Goldkit exclaimed.

"Not if I am first!" Daisykit teased.

"I just hope Smokestar chooses good mentors for us," Snowkit squeaked.

"You've watched the apprentice ceremonies from the den before. You know Smokestar always makes the best choice," Flameclaw reminded her kits.

Memories swarmed back to her in their early kithood days when they would cram in the entrance of the nursery to get a peek at the apprentice ceremony. With each ceremony they witnessed, she could feel them becoming more anxious and excited.

"I think I'll catch the first piece of prey," Daisykit declared.

"But I'll have the better fighting moves," Goldkit returned.

"Remember you three have to collect moss for the elders too," Barkfern spoke up.

All three of them let out a groan, that one duty clearly having escaped their mind in all the excitement.

"I hope Ripplekit, Cloudkit, and Hazelkit will be made apprentices shortly after us. I don't want to be alone with all the older apprentices," Snowkit spoke quietly.

"Come here, dear," Flameclaw said, clearly noticing her daughter's apprehension.

The pure white she-cat padded over to her mother and laid down beside her. Daisykit and Goldkit sat down across from their mother,

curious as to what she had to say.

"Being an apprentice can be frightening at first. You'll be in a new den with lots of older apprentices who've already had moons of training. It may seem intimidating at first, but soon, you'll get the hang of it. I wasn't the best apprentice starting out, but with good training, you'll notice all the improvements you've made, and soon, you'll be the eldest apprentices in the nursery as well," Flameclaw promised.

"Were you scared when you first became an apprentice?" Goldkit asked his mother.

"Of course. My good friend had decided to become a medicine cat apprentice, so I didn't see her much. The other apprentices were kind, but I hadn't formed as deep of a bond with them. But soon Barkfern came along, and we became good friends. You'll get used to life in the apprentice den, I assure you. And then, after working hard for six moons, you'll get to become warriors!"

"Warriors! I can't wait!" Daisykit exclaimed.

"It's not easy though. It takes a lot of work," Barkfern warned.

"And fooling around as an apprentice isn't as easily forgiven," Flameclaw explained, eyeing Goldkit. He shrunk down and laughed nervously.

"Now run off and play with your friends. You won't have as much time left to do that," Barkfern ordered.

The kits nodded and ran off again, joining back into their game.

Flameclaw laughed slightly and turned to Barkfern.

"Who are we to give them advice? We had anything but a normal apprenticehood," Flameclaw said.

Barkfern shrugged. "Maybe it's better we had a tougher apprenticehood. That way we'll get to see them have a normal and easier one."

Flameclaw nodded, keeping her eyes fixated on the playing kits. Already she could detect skills in them that would help in their apprentice training. She noticed the strong force in Goldkit's claws, Snowkit's fast movements, and Daisykit's powerful jumping.

Flameclaw smiled, no longer saddened by their upcoming absence. In fact, she was excited to see them enter a new chapter of their life as members of SnowClan.

Chapter 33

"Wake up! Wake up!" came the frantic call of Flameclaw's kits. The ginger she-cat slowly opened her eyes to find her three large kits towering over her sleeping body, excitement spread upon their faces.

"What time is it?" Flameclaw muttered, noticing that the kits still seemed to appear as dark silhouettes.

"Sunrise," Daisykit replied.

"But you have to get up! Our ceremony!" Goldkit reminded her.

Flameclaw chuckled slightly. "Your ceremony won't be for a little while longer. Go back to sleep."

The three whimpered, unhappy with this idea.

"But we can't sleep," Snowkit protested.

Flameclaw sighed. "Well, I can clean your pelts then."

"On second thought, we'll sleep," Goldkit decided.

Flameclaw purred, glad they had accepted this idea. She rested her head back down and shut her eyes, awakening a few hours later when the sun had fully arisen.

Flameclaw awoke to the sound of cats moving about and knew that the ceremony would have to be soon. Her kits were already awake chatting excitedly with their friends. She could hear them speaking of how they'd miss their friends but would be glad when they joined them as apprentices.

Flameclaw smiled, glad to see her kits take on their new journey as warriors.

"Daisykit, Goldkit, Snowkit, come here!" she called, waving the kits over.

"We thought you'd sleep through the ceremony," Daisykit joked.

"Before the ceremony, I need to clean off your pelts," Flameclaw decided.

"Aw, but why?" Goldkit complained.

"You're first, mister," she teased, seizing him by the scruff. Despite his growth, Flameclaw was still stronger than him, and she licked his fur and cleaned it as the tom flailed and whined.

When Goldkit was finished being cleaned, he rushed away from his mother and shook off his fur.

"I hate being clean," he muttered.

"Who's next?" Flameclaw asked, turning to the girls.

Snowkit volunteered, and after her pelt had been brushed down as well, Flameclaw worked on Daisykit, who complained just as much as Goldkit. Soon, all her kits looked their best, and Flameclaw smiled, excited to see them pad up the rock.

"Flameclaw," came a voice from outside the den.

The she-cat glanced up to see Smokestar looking in. He caught Flameclaw's eye and asked, "Are they ready?"

She nodded.

Her kits let out a squeal, and she led them out of the nursery while Smokestar headed up to the rock.

"Let's go!" Daisykit exclaimed, attempting to burst to the rock. Flameclaw stopped the silver tabby with her paw.

"Not until Smokestar calls you," she told her. The she-cat frowned but remained put.

"ALL CATS OLD ENOUGH TO CATCH THEIR OWN PREY, JOIN BENEATH THE ROCK FOR A CLAN MEETING!" Smokestar yowled.

Soon, cats began to gather, and Flameclaw watched as her kits twitched with excitement. Smokestar caught the kits' eyes and motioned them up. They took one last look at their mother and rushed away. Flameclaw grinned and scanned the audience until she spotted Barkfern. She happily trotted to him and sat down next to him.

"Were they excited?" he asked.

"Not excited to get their coats cleaned," she joked.

"Flameclaw's kits have reached six moons," Smokestar began when the crowd had quieted down, "which means they are ready to become apprentices." He turned first to Goldkit who stood proudly on the rock. He looked like a natural-born warrior.

"Goldkit, from this day forward, until you receive your warrior name, you shall be known as Goldpaw."

Goldpaw grinned excitedly and waited as Smokestar assigned his mentor.

"Thornfrost," Smokestar called from the audience.

Flameclaw watched as the crowd moved aside to let a golden brown tabby through. He was an older warrior, and his mate had just recently given birth to a litter of kits in the nursery.

"He's a good warrior,"Barkfern advised Flameclaw. "I've been on patrols with him before."

Flameclaw nodded, glad her son was being taught by someone so esteemed.

"You possess the talents of bravery and strength," Smokestar told Thornfrost. "Please, pass these onto Goldpaw."

"I shall," Thornfrost replied.

Goldpaw rushed down the rock and touched noses with his mentor. Flameclaw cheered quietly, glad to see her son so excited.

"Daisykit," Smokestar said, now turning to the gray tabby. "From this day forward, until you receive your warrior name, you shall be known as Daisypaw." There was a brief moment of silence as the she-cat embraced her new name.

"Rainfoot," Smokestar called.

This time, a gray tabby tom stepped forward. He was younger than Thornfrost, perhaps only a newly-named senior warrior.

"You are cunning and sly. Pass these talents onto Daisypaw."

"I will try my best, Smokestar," the tom replied.

Daisypaw ran down the rock, not as quickly as Goldpaw, and touched her nose to her new mentor's. The clan let out a roar of applause.

"And Snowkit," Smokestar spoke, turning to Flameclaw's last kit. "From this day forward, until you receive your warrior name, you shall be known as Snowpaw. Mintfall," he called.

A white and gray she-cat padded forward.

"She's one of our eldest warriors," Barkfern whispered to Flameclaw. "Her kits are already grown and are nearly senior warriors."

"Mintfall, you are wise and loving. Please pass this onto Snowpaw."

"Yes, Smokestar," the she-cat agreed.

Snowpaw bounded down the rock and touched her nose to the other she-cat. Then, she ascended back onto the rock to join her siblings.

"GOLDPAW! DAISYPAW! SNOWPAW!"the clan cried in excitement. The kits smiled more than Flameclaw had ever seen them smile before.

Soon, the crowd began to disperse, and Flameclaw and Barkfern padded over to the new apprentices, filled with love and warmth for them.

"Congratulations!" Barkfern told his kits.

"Isn't it exciting? I can't wait to go look around the territory!" Daisypaw exclaimed.

"I'm sure you'll all makelovely apprentices," Flameclaw purred.

"Goldpaw, time to go!" came Thornfrost's voice.

Goldpaw waved good-bye to his parents and ran off, the others dispersing with him. Soon, Flameclaw and Barkfernwere left alone. Tears gathered in Flameclaw's eyes. She did not expect she would miss being with the kits so much.

Barkfern, taking notice, wrapped his tail around her.

"Come on. Let me show you your new nest," he told her.

Flameclaw nodded and followed him inside the warriors' den. It was much larger than she expected, and she was filled with awe. He led her to the corner where a newly-made nest sat.

"This is for you," he purred.

Flameclaw smiled and licked his cheek.

"Thank you. It feels good to finally be a warrior," she admitted. "But I think I might still miss the kits some."

"We'll still see them though and hear all about their adventures. Now, you can finally go on patrols and hunt with me. It'll be nice to spend more time with you," Barkfern explained.

Flameclaw nodded, glad she could finally spend majority of her time with her mate again. She had not been able to see him as much while in the nursery. Now, they could finally enjoy clan life together for the first time.

"Maybe we can spy on the kits while on patrol," she whispered.

Barkfern giggled. "Maybe. Now, come on. Let's go hunting together."

Flameclaw nodded and padded with him outside the den, her tail intertwining with his.

Chapter 34

Flameclaw sat out in the SnowClan camp early one morning, sharing a fresh squirrel with Barkfern. It had been a few moons since her kits had become apprentices, and she had found she enjoyed the warrior life.

If only I had been a warrior in RiverClan, she wondered, though her thoughts of RiverClan were slowly fading. She realized she could not cling onto her old clan forever, and seeing her kits thriving and doing so well made her feel as if she truly belonged in SnowClan.

She had grown used to the warrior pattern now. She had to admit, she missed sleeping in like in the nursery, but there was something exciting about getting up early to share a meal with her mate and then heading off on patrol. They had not run into too much trouble, but Flameclaw had enjoyed becoming more familiar with the forest.

Often, she and Barkfern would hunt in their free time too. She was glad to be able to spend much more time with him. They were practically inseparable since their kits had become apprentices.

Barkfern would often joke of another litter, and Flameclaw would laugh, but she knew she didn't want this. She loved her kits, and she had no desire to have any more. Being a warrior had been what she always wanted, and she hoped to stay that way.

"Barkfern, Flameclaw, Cloudfur wants you on patrol," a warrior advised them.

"Early morning patrol, I guess," Barkfern muttered.

"We'll be there in a second," Flameclaw replied.

They left the fragments of the squirrel behind and headed out to the border of the camp where Cloudfur was waiting for them with other SnowClan warriors.

"Let's head out!" he announced.

Flameclaw trotted by Barkfern's side as they padded into the SnowClan forest.

"I'm sure the kits will be very happy today," Flameclaw explained.

"Why's that?" Barkfern replied.

"Ripplekit, Cloudkit, and Hazelkit are becoming apprentices today. They haven't been telling you that all week?" Flameclaw wondered.

Barkfern chuckled slightly.

"I suppose I wasn't listening," he admitted.

"We should be back in time for the ceremony," Flameclaw explained.

They continued on patrol. All of the borders seemed to be untouched, and a few cats even managed to catch some decent pieces of prey. All in all, it was a normal morning patrol, and they returned back to camp late morning.

As Flameclaw entered, she noticed Smokestar had already made his way up to the rock laying in the center of camp to make announcements. She had noticed his health declining slightly in the past few moons, though she did not find him too old. It made her wonder what life he was on.

"ALL CATS OLD ENOUGH TO CATCH THEIR OWN PREY, JOIN BENEATH THE ROCK FOR A CLAN MEETING!" he yowled.

Flameclaw nudged against Barkfern and went to join the crowd that had gathered underneath the rock. She glanced around and noticed their kits sitting right in the front row, eager to welcome their friends.

The three large kits padded up the rock and sat by Smokestar's side, awaiting the ceremony to begin.

"Ripplekit, Cloudkit, and Hazelkit have reached six moons,"

Smokestar began, "which means they are ready to become apprentices."

"Ripplekit," Smokestar began, turning to the she-cat. "From this day forward, until you receive your warrior name, you shall be known as Ripplepaw."

Flameclaw watched the she-cat's eyes light up with excitement and thought back to her own apprentice ceremony that had been so many moons before.

Smokestar next called out her mentor and began naming the rest of the apprentices and mentors. All the new apprentices seemed content with their mentors, and Flameclaw had believed them all to be fine choices. She had grown to know many of the new warriors in SnowClan and was good friends with quite a few of them.

When all mentors had been named, the clan began to cry out and rejoice over the new apprentices.

"RIPPLEPAW! CLOUDPAW! HAZELPAW!" they cried. Flameclaw could hear her kits shouting the loudest.

"They must be thrilled to have some friends with them now," Barkfern said to Flameclaw.

She nodded her head, wondering if perhaps her kits would form romantic relationships with any of their friends. It was a silly thought. They were only apprentices. But then again, Flameclaw had only been an apprentice when she met Barkpaw.

Thinking of her kits growing up and having kits of their own hurt her head, so she shook the thoughts away and watched as the crowd began to disperse. She noticed her kits talking eagerly with their friends, and as Ripplepaw, Cloudpaw, and Hazelpaw were drawn away, Flameclaw approached them.

"Momma!" Daisypaw exclaimed, rushing to her mother.

She did not get to see the kits as often as she liked. They would often speak in the evenings or early mornings, but they mostly only saw each other once a day or every other day.

The other kits ran to her excitedly. Flameclaw grinned, noticing how large they were getting. Soon they would almost be as large as her, or even bigger. Goldpaw was already nearly her size. Barkfern approached now and let out a gentle smile.

"Are you glad your friends are apprentices now?" he asked.

The three nodded their heads vigorously.

"It's gotten to be so boring in the apprentice den!" Snowpaw complained. "Now maybe we can sneak playing moss-ball."

"I'm sure your mentors will allow you to train with them. You three sometimes train together, don't you?" Flameclaw wondered.

Daisypaw nodded. "Occasionally. I totally beat Goldpaw in battle training yesterday."

"Did not!" Goldpaw argued.

"He's just being a sore loser about it," Snowpaw joked.

The two she-cats laughed while Goldpaw pouted.

"Training going well?" Barkfern asked.

"Mintfall says I'm doing really well!" Snowpaw exclaimed.

"Good," Flameclaw purred. "I'm sure you'll all be warriors real soon."

"I hope," Goldpaw complained. "I'm sick of getting moss for the elders."

"Well, being a warrior unfortunately comes with responsibilities too. Although, not those types," Barkfern explained, laughing slightly.

"We have to go train now," Daisypaw exclaimed, pointing her to tail to where the mentors were waiting.

"Have fun. I'm proud of you!" Flameclaw called as they padded off.

"I think they're happy here," Barkfern observed after they had

padded away.

Flameclaw nodded.

"Are you happy here?" he asked. "I know it isn't RiverClan, but I feel like I've really grown to enjoy SnowClan."

"I am happy," Flameclaw assured him. "As much as I wish RiverClan didn't have to go, I'm glad the kits are doing so well here and are so accepted. This is a very nice clan. It's strong too."

"Well, want to hunt?" Barkfern wondered.

"Sure," Flameclaw purred, padding off with him into the woods.

Chapter 35

Another few moons had passed, and in that time, Flameclaw had noticed great change. Her kits were growing and maturing rapidly. Goldnose had grown taller than her, and her daughters were growing more beautiful each day.

She especially noticed the skill of her kits. They became more and more involved in their training and were soon hunting and fighting as well as her, she supposed. It had been amazing to witness such a change. She was glad to see them go through a normal apprenticeship.

And now her kits' warrior ceremony was upon them, or so she believed. She knew when she awoke that it would be the day of her kits' warrior test. She had prayed early to StarClan hoping that they receive good luck on their tests.

Nervous yet excited for what the day may bring, Flameclaw awoke earlier than Barkfern, longing to see her kits to wish them good luck before their test. She found them gathered around the fresh-kill pile, though none of them seemed to be touching a morsel.

Flameclaw approached them cheerfully, watching as their eyes lit up as they saw their mother.

"Mother! You came to see us!" Daisypaw exclaimed happily.

Flameclaw smiled and nodded. Her kits had grown away from calling her "Mama" and now referred to her as "Mother."

"I wanted to wish you luck before your test," she told them. "Not that I think you'll need it."

She watched them all grumble with anxiousness.

"I've seen you three improve and work well these past six moons. I have the highest faith that you'll succeed," she promised.

"But what if we don't?" Snowpaw whimpered.

"There will always be other opportunities, but I'm sure you'll all do well."

"Thanks," Goldpaw replied.

Their mentors called them shortly after. Flameclaw watched as they ran off and smiled lightly. In a way, she almost didn't want them to become warriors. She still wished they'd remain her tiny kits. But she knew time had a way of changing things.

She went off and found Barkfern, who agreed also that the kits would surely pass their warrior evaluation.

When afternoon rolled around, Flameclaw waited with anticipation to hear if her kits truly would be becoming warriors. As she sat out in camp, she watched as her kits' mentors approached the leader's den.

Flameclaw's paws twitched with anticipation. She turned her attention to the den, where Cloudstar sat aside. The previous leader, Smokestar, had died only a moon or so before. His death had confused Flameclaw as he'd been killed by an evil Dark Forest spirit that was said to have haunted SnowClan moons before. She had known this spirit, named Moonstar, had been growing stronger, though she hoped it wouldn't interfere with her or her kits.

As the mentors re-emerged from their dens, Flameclaw wanted to shriek with joy as she watched Cloudstar follow behind them. The white tom padded up the top of the rock where he let out a loud yowl.

"ALL CATS OLD ENOUGH TO CATCH THEIR OWN PREY, JOIN BENEATH THE ROCK FOR A CLAN MEETING!"

Flameclaw found Barkfern immediately.

"They must've done well," Barkfern observed.

Flameclaw nodded vigorously, happy for her kits. She watched as her three kits bounded up the rock, just as they'd done for their

apprentice ceremony. They all smiled happily. Flameclaw smiled back at them, her heart swelling with pride.

"I have just heard from the mentors of these three, and they believe that their apprentices are ready to become warriors," Cloudstar began. He glanced around, and a sharp silence fell over the crowd.

"I call upon my warrior ancestors to look upon these three apprentices. They have trained hard to follow your noble code, and I grant them to you as warriors in return. Goldpaw," he began.

Flameclaw watched as her son took a step forward. He was tall and muscular, like his father, and his golden pelt gleamed in the sunlight.

"From this day forward, you shall be known as Goldnose. Daisypaw," Cloudstar continued, turning to the gray tabby.

Daisypaw stepped forward nervously, though her smile was wide.

"From this day forward, you shall be known as Daisyfern. And Snowpaw," he finished, turning to the smallest of the three. "From this day forward, you shall be known as Snowripple."

"GOLDNOSE! DAISYFERN! SNOWRIPPLE!" the clan cried with excitement. Flameclaw and Barkfern surely shouted the loudest, proud of their three kits. Flameclaw felt a pang of heartache, however, knowing that her kits no longer really needed her or Barkfern. They would be on their own patrols now and own hunts, and she suspected they may have mates in the future.

Once the shouting had died down and the crowd had dispersed, Flameclaw and Barkfern approached their kits just as they had finished their conversations with Cloudpaw, Ripplepaw, and Hazelpaw.

"Did you see how great I looked up there?" Daisyfern immediately asked.

Flameclaw chuckled. "Yes. You looked very happy."

"I can't wait to start doing warrior duties!" Snowripple exclaimed.

"And no more gathering moss!" Goldnose exclaimed.

"You'll be in the same den as us now," Flameclaw pointed out. "Though I suppose you won't be curling up next to me anymore."

They all laughed and continued to talk about the excitement. It was growing late, however, and Flameclaw knew her kits would be staying up for vigil.

"We're very proud of you," Barkfern told them. "Just be sure not to fall asleep during the vigil."

"I'll just poke them awake if they do," Goldnose promised.

Daisyfern laughed. "Who says I'll fall asleep? Odds are I'm going to have to wake *you* up!"

The two poked at each other and laughed, reminding Flameclaw of when they were kits.

They may be warriors now, she thought, *but they sure do act like kits still.*

"Congratulations," she mewed warmly. "You've all worked very hard to deserve this title."

The three smiled, and after a quick good-bye, Flameclaw padded away with Barkfern, ignoring the tears gathering in her eyes.

"You okay?" he asked.

Flameclaw smiled. "Just proud, that's all."

Barkfern smiled and licked her cheek. Flameclaw let out a purr and intertwined her tail with his as they entered the warriors' den.

Chapter 36

Flameclaw's kits had been warriors for a little over a moon now. It was nice to have them close to her again, though she knew it would never compare to the closeness she felt with them in the nursery as kits.

After successfully completing their night vigil, her kits had chosen nests relatively close to their parents as they were not yet familiar with the other warriors. Flameclaw noticed the nervousness of her kits at first as they took on warrior duties, but soon, they began to settle in and act more comfortable.

It made her proud to see her kits go out on patrol and bring back pieces of fresh prey for the clan. She knew they were doing well in SnowClan, and she was glad to see them prospering as warriors. Flameclaw too enjoyed her warrior life alongside with Barkfern, and for once, the pain of RiverClan did not strike at her. She felt like she was finally able to let go.

At times, Flameclaw's mind often wandered into the possibility of having a second litter, but Flameclaw often shook these thoughts away. She was content with her life and her family. While she had enjoyed raising her kits, she still remembered the annoyance of being confined in the nursery. As a warrior of SnowClan, she felt like she truly belonged. She had always wanted to be a warrior, not a nursery queen, and so she decided this would be the life for her.

She could not say the same for her kits. She knew it would only be a matter of time before they too took on mates of their own and began to raise their own families. Her kits were still very close with their nursery playmates, and she suspected some of them might become mates in the near future.

Flameclaw sat outside with Barkfern one morning, sharing a piece of prey, when she noticed Cloudstar padding up the top of the rock.

"Cloudpaw, Ripplepaw, and Hazelpaw are being made warriors

today," Barkfern explained when Flameclaw glanced at him in confusion.

"Oh! Are they?" she asked, suddenly excited. She knew very well that the reason none of her kits had mates yet was because their close friends were still apprentices. She began to squirm excitedly, thinking of her kits raising their own families.

"What are you doing?" Barkfern asked.

"Just thinking," Flameclaw purred.

"Goldnose told me all about the warrior ceremony yesterday," Barkfern explained. "He seemed very excited."

"I think he's excited for Hazelpaw to become a warrior," Flameclaw suggested.

Barkfern chuckled. "I think so, too. Though I never really saw him as having mates and kits on his mind."

Flameclaw shrugged. "Things change when you get older. I certainly didn't plan to become mates with you or have kits so quickly."

Barkfern laughed. "I guess you're right. I'm glad everything worked out. Imagine if you'd had the litter in the forest."

Flameclaw's eyes widened. "Oh, I don't know what I'd have done! But I like SnowClan now. I'm really happy here, Barkfern."

"I'm glad," he replied, his eyes gleaming. "I am too."

Flameclaw purred and licked his cheek just as Cloudstar began.

"ALL CATS OLD ENOUGH TO CATCH THEIR OWN PREY, JOIN BENEATH THE HIGH ROCK FOR A CLAN MEETING!" he yowled.

Flameclaw followed Barkfern over to the rock, noticing that her kits were already stationed in the front. They too seemed to be squirming with excitement.

Flameclaw turned her head to see the three apprentices padding up

the rock. They had grown so much. Flameclaw remembered when they had been born in the nursery shortly after the birth of her own kits. My, how time had flown.

As the three apprentices came to a halt beside Cloudstar, the crowd slowly quieted, and Cloudstar began to speak.

"I call upon my warrior ancestors to look upon these apprentices. They have trained hard to follow your noble code, and I grant them to you as warriors in return. Cloudpaw," he began, turning to the large white tom.

Cloudpaw took a step forward, his muscles flexed.

"From this day forward, you shall be known as Cloudwind," Cloudstar announced.

Cloudwind smiled and waved at the crowd down below.

"Ripplepaw," Cloudstar continued. The silver tabby tom stepped forward. He was more timid than Cloudwind and glanced down at his paws.

"From this day forward, you shall be known as Rippleslash. And Hazelpaw," he said, turning to brown she-cat. "From this day forward, you shall be known as Hazelstream."

"CLOUDWIND! RIPPLESLASH! HAZELSTREAM!" the clan cried. Flameclaw and Barkfern cried with them. Though they were not her own kits, Flameclaw felt a connection to them and was glad to see them as warriors.

As the crowds began to disperse, Flameclaw meant to seek out her kits, but she found them already preoccupied as they chatted away with their friends.

"We can talk to them later," Barkfern suggested.

"Sh. Wait," she said. She hadn't meant to spy, but it appeared all of them were speaking in quiet and intimate conversations with the others. Could it be?

Finally, her kits dispersed and padded away happily. Before Flameclaw could even approach any of them, Goldnose bounded up to his parents.

"I've asked Hazelstream to be my mate, and she said yes!" Goldnose exclaimed. "Isn't that great?!"

Flameclaw smiled. "I'm happy for you, Goldnose."

"I thought you wanted to be a tough warrior, huh? No time for a mate and kits," Barkfern teased.

"I-I didn't say anything about kits," Goldnose responded, blushing slightly. "But I am happy to have a mate."

"Where are your sisters?" Flameclaw asked. "I wanted to speak to them too."

"Over there," Goldnose responded, pointing to the two of them sitting near the fresh-kill pile. They appeared to be chatting excitedly, and their voices were high and screechy.

Flameclaw padded over to them and had to speak loudly to interrupt their conversation.

"Hello, girls," she spoke loudly.

They spun around, frightened at first, then relieved to see it was only their mother.

"Oh, hi," Snowripple purred.

"You two seem very happy," Barkfern observed.

"Cloudwind has asked Snowripple to be his mate," Daisyfern purred. Snowripple glanced away, embarrassed.

"And Rippleslash has asked Daisyfern to be his!" Snowripple responded.

Daisyfern rolled her eyes and shoved her sister.

"Congratulations, you two," Flameclaw purred.

"I can't wait to have a mate and kits!" Snowripple exclaimed.

"I made it very clear to Rippleslash that I don't want kits," Daisyfern explained. "A mate will already distract me from my warrior duties."

"We'll see," Flameclaw teased. She had not expected to have kits so early. Perhaps Daisyfern would change her mind.

She and Barkfern congratulated the kits one last time and headed back to the warrior den. Flameclaw smiled, glad to see her kits adjusting well to clan life.

Chapter 37

Flameclaw padded out of the woods alongside Barkfern, carrying a dead squirrel in her jaws. They had spent the afternoon hunting for the clan, giving them some quality time together. It made Flameclaw miss the times they would spend in RiverClan together as apprentices, back before they had warrior duties.

But Flameclaw enjoyed being a warrior here, and she enjoyed being with her family here even more. It had been several moons now since her kits had become warriors, and she couldn't help but take pride in their accomplishments.

They had adapted to warrior life very well, and they seemed to get along with their mates even better. It was hard to imagine that they had once been slightly larger than Flameclaw's paw. Goldnose and Daisyfern were both larger than her now, though she and Snowripple were about the same size.

Flameclaw turned and glanced at Barkfern. He carried a dead mouse in his jaws. It was significantly smaller than Flameclaw's kill. She had teased him about when he first killed it, which had led to some laughter and fun. It reminded Flameclaw of her apprentice days again.

Barkfern spit out his mouse and glanced at his mate.

"Why are you staring at me?" he asked.

Flameclaw chuckled. "No reason."

"If it's to make fun of my kill..."

"It's not. Don't worry," she teased. He retrieved his mouse and continued walking alongside her until they came into the opening of the camp. They quickly found their way to the fresh-kill pile and

dropped their prey.

"Not a bad catch," Barkfern told her as he stared at the dead squirrel.

"Oh, *now* you say so," Flameclaw replied, shoving a paw against him.

"Hey, no wrestling here," Barkfern warned. "Or else we're as bad as the kits in the nursery."

Flameclaw rolled her eyes. "You're no fun."

She glanced over toward the nursery where several kits played. Her heart warmed as she heard their tiny shrieks of laughter and watched them bound around with their tiny legs. She had at one time considered another litter, but she was content now. Her mind now drifted to the possibility of her children having kits of their own.

"Hey, Flameclaw, Barkfern," came a familiar voice.

Flameclaw spun around and recognized Goldnose.

"Can I talk to you guys for a second?" he asked.

"S-Sure," Barkfern stammered, taken aback.

Goldnose led them to an empty corner of the camp and sat down. Flameclaw and Barkfern sat down across from him and waited for him to speak. The tom appeared to be nervous though as he suddenly stood up again and began pacing in front of them.

"Is everything okay?" Flameclaw asked.

"Goldnose?" Barkfern spoke up.

"Oh," the tom replied, realizing they were waiting for him to speak. "Yeah. Everything's fine. Great actually. Hazelstream is expecting kits."

Flameclaw let out a shriek of excitement, so loud that Goldnose

jumped.

"Congratulations," Barkfern purred.

"Thanks," Goldnose replied quietly.

"Everything all right?" Flameclaw asked.

"I'm just nervous," Goldnose admitted. "I wasn't expecting to have kits so soon. Hazelstream is excited, but I don't know if I'll be a good father or not."

"You should talk to your father," Flameclaw said, eyeing Barkfern.

"I didn't think I was ready either," Barkfern explained. "And for us, it was so much more difficult. We were clanless when your mother discovered she was pregnant, and we worried she'd have the kits before we even reached a clan. But you are in a stable and safe clan here. All of us will work together to make sure your kits are safe and well taken care of."

"But what if they don't like me?" Goldnose whimpered.

"Who couldn't like you?" Flameclaw told him. "You're one of the best toms I know."

Goldnose stood a little firmer now. "Well...I guess so."

Flameclaw laughed slightly, knowing just how to make her son feel better.

"Spottedmask is a good medicine cat. She'll know what to do," Barkfern assured him.

"Thanks," Goldnose purred.

He padded off happily, leaving Flameclaw and Barkfern alone.

"Well, I feel old now," Barkfern admitted.

Flameclaw laughed. "I can't wait to see my grandkits!" she exclaimed.

A few moons passed, and Flameclaw had grown with excitement as Hazelstream's stomach grew and eventually she moved into the nursery. While she could tell Goldnose was still nervous, he seemed more confident than he had before, and even excited to perform fatherly duties.

One morning in the SnowClan camp, Flameclaw was awakened by a sudden shriek. She glanced up, realizing Hazelstream's kits were coming. Her eyes grew wide, and she shook Barkfern's side.

"I think Hazelstream is giving birth," she whispered.

Barkfern slowly rose to his feet, and the two peeked out of the den. Flameclaw noticed Goldnose rushing to the nursery, and she was about to take off herself when Barkfern stopped her.

"No. We should give them all the space we need. We'll visit after they're born."

Flameclaw pouted but agreed. She laid down with her head resting outside the den's opening, anxiously anticipating her new grandkits.

The screams grew louder though and appeared to sound more like screams of fear than pain. Flameclaw listened intently, wondering what was wrong, when she watched Thornfrost, the deputy, bounding into camp and toward the nursery.

"Hazelstream!" he shouted.

"Is something wrong?" Barkfern asked.

"I-I don't know," Flameclaw admitted, growing very nervous suddenly.

Hazelstream let out more screams, and the world appeared to darken around them slightly. She heard Thornfrost hissing from the nursery and gasped as two shadowy cats emerged from the nursery and flew into the air, a newborn black and white she-cat grasped in their paws.

"Hazelstream's kits!" Flameclaw shouted.

"What's going on?" Barkfern asked.

The other cats seemed to be confused as well, and Flameclaw bounded to the nursery. Hazelstream's screams had stopped, and she could hear Thornfrost and Goldnose arguing from inside the nursery.

"Don't be angry with him, Goldnose," she heard Hazelstream plead. "If he hadn't helped, all of our kits would be dead."

Flameclaw backed away slowly, not wanting to get involved in whatever argument they were having. Her heart dropped as she realized the kit that had been taken had been one of theirs. She had lost a grandkit, and her heart ached.

"Let's give them some space," Barkfern advised, leading her away from the nursery.

They sat in the sun for a while, not speaking to each other. They were not sure what happened, but they knew it couldn't have been good. Finally, Goldnose approached them. He did not appear as upset as when they had first seen him, though sadness still gleamed in his eyes.

"What happened?" Flameclaw demanded.

"I still don't understand it, but apparently Hazelstream was connected to some prophecy of Thornfrost's. Apparently Thornfrost's kin are currently in danger from the Dark Forest, and...one of the Dark Forest cats stole one of our daughters. Thornfrost fought off the others though. There are still three kits for you to meet," Goldnose explained.

"I'm so sorry," Barkfern murmured.

"Come on. Meet your grandkits," Goldnose insisted, trying to divert away from the topic.

Flameclaw followed him to the nursery. While she was still saddened that they had a lost a kit, she was excited to meet Hazelstream and Goldnose's remaining kits. He led her inside the nursery where Hazelstream lay splayed on her nest. Three kits

suckled at her belly.

"Two toms and one she-cat," Hazelstream explained.

"Hi, there, little ones," Flameclaw spoke quietly, glancing at the newborn kits.

Two were mucky brown toms while the other was a white and gold she-cat.

"What are their names?" Barkfern inquired.

"The larger tom is Muddykit," Goldnose exclaimed.

"And the smaller is Grasskit," Hazelstream added.

"And the she-cat?" Flameclaw asked.

"Caramelkit," Goldnose said.

"Did you name the...other one?" Barkfern asked quietly.

Hazelstream sighed. "We decided to call her Rosekit. I-I hope to see her in StarClan one day," she stammered, holding back tears.

"They're all beautiful," Flameclaw assured her. "We'll let you rest now. I know it's been a long day."

Goldnose led them out of the nursery.

"Congratulations, Goldnose," Barkfern told him. "You'll make a great father."

"But I couldn't save Rosekit," he spoke quietly.

"There was nothing you could do," Flameclaw assured him. "You can't dwell on one kit so long. You have three others who are safe and healthy and need your care. And you can help protect them by caring for them."

"Thank you. I...I'm trying my best," her son replied.

"Let us know when we can visit again," Flameclaw said.

Goldnose nodded and padded back to the nursery to be with his mate and new kits. Flameclaw smiled weakly. She knew the event had taken a toll on her son, but she hoped it wouldn't interfere with his new relationship with his kits.

Chapter 38

Many moons had passed since the birth of Goldnose's kits. Flameclaw had watched them grow with such love for them. They would be warriors very shortly, making her feel even older. It seemed like she had given birth eons ago.

Goldnose had gotten over the loss of Rosekit within a few moons, though he and Hazelstream never seemed to forget her. Flameclaw, meanwhile, had enjoyed visiting the kits and telling them stories about her and Barkfern's adventures. They seemed to take a liking to them and grew close to their grandmother and grandfather.

But the kits soon grew older, as did Flameclaw. They were soon apprentices and off training, becoming far too busy to listen to stories. Goldnose would often tell her of their new-forming crushes, making Flameclaw and Barkfern laugh. And feel older.

Her daughters did not have kits, but Flameclaw still had hope maybe one day they'd have kits of their own. She knew that she, herself, would no longer have kits, and she doubted Goldnose would have another litter. Still, she continued to watch her own kits excel at their warrior duties and enjoyed seeing her grandkits take on the same task.

Change had come to SnowClan. Seasons had come and gone, and with it brought new cats and the loss of others. Their medicine cat, Spottedmask, had finally retired and had passed away shortly after. Her apprentice, Sandheart, had taken the new position of medicine cat while Sandheart took on a former warrior, Spiritheart, as her apprentice.

Meanwhile, Flameclaw watched as more queens moved into the nursery, and more cats around her age moved to the elders' den. She and Barkfern were quickly becoming some of the eldest warriors.

Flameclaw didn't want to admit it, but she had been slowing down

too. Her muscles began to ache in the morning, which she hadn't noticed before. She completed tasks much slower, and she wasn't bringing in as much prey as normal. She had noticed some of these things in Barkfern too, though she wasn't sure if he had observed the same things.

It was when Flameclaw's back ached too much to go on a hunting patrol one day that she knew her time as a warrior was quickly ending. She didn't want to acknowledge the white hairs growing around her muzzle and face or her slowed pace, but she was becoming older, and soon, it would be time to become an elder.

Becoming an elder was the last thing the flame-colored she-cat wanted to do. She had enjoyed her time as a warrior so much and wanted to die as one, but she knew this could not be. She would start slowing down the clan. Besides, she knew many cats in the elders' den. They were all kind too. It wouldn't be a bad thing...

One morning, while she and Barkfern were sharing a squirrel before patrol, Flameclaw let out a sigh.

"Is everything all right?" the tom asked his mate.

"You've got some gray on your muzzle," she pointed out.

Barkfern chuckled. "Don't want to see me age, huh?"

"You know it isn't that," she responded.

"You don't want to grow old," he teased.

Flameclaw nodded, taking another bite of her squirrel.

"I-I think it's time we retire to the elders' den soon. We've both been slowing down, me more so than you, I suppose. But my muscles have been aching more, I'm not as swift as I've been, and napping sounds so pleasant now," she admitted. "I'm tired."

"Me too," Barkfern admitted. "And I know you say that I don't act as tired, but I think lots of times I hide it to protect you. My back legs have been bothering me for a while now. Sometimes I visit Sandheart."

Flameclaw's eyes widened. "Oh, do you? And what does she say?"

"She says I should retire soon," Barkfern explained.

Flameclaw nodded.

"I'm ready to become an elder. Are you?" she asked.

Barkfern dipped his head and nodded.

"We're in green-leaf right now. I don't know if I can stand another leaf-bare as a warrior in my state," he said.

"Me too," Flameclaw agreed.

"Let's talk to Cloudstar today," Barkfern decided. "Maybe he can move us by this afternoon."

"Good idea."

The two discarded the rest of their squirrel and padded toward the leader's den. Before they could even make it to the entrance, however, Cloudstar bounded out of his den in a panic and began pacing around.

"This can't be happening," he muttered. "It simply can't."

"Cloudstar, is something wrong?" Flameclaw asked.

The tom glanced at her then glanced away again.

"I'm sorry, Flameclaw. I must make an announcement to the clan immediately," he explained. And with that, she watched him race up the rock. Cats turned to him in confusion. They hadn't been expecting a warrior or apprentice ceremony today.

"ALL CATS OLD ENOUGH TO CATCH THEIR OWN PREY, JOIN BENEATH THE HIGH ROCK FOR A CLAN MEETING!" Cloudstar yowled.

Flameclaw hesitantly approached the rock with Barkfern, wondering what was going on. A few cats asked her if they had any

idea what Cloudstar was speaking about, but Flameclaw only shrugged. She knew from his expression though that it couldn't be good.

"I regret to make this announcement, but I fear our worst enemy has returned. MoonClan has come back to the forest, this time with Hazelnose, the daughter of Moonstar, as their leader," Cloudstar announced.

Cats let out gasps and worried cries. Flameclaw glanced around in confusion. She had heard some stories of MoonClan, how many moons ago, around the time of her birth, an evil she-cat had started her own clan and had declared war on SnowClan. SnowClan had driven MoonClan off, and the clan was believed to have been finished, but she guessed not.

"I know that many of you are unfamiliar with MoonClan, though you've heard the stories. I was but a young warrior when they attacked. Many of our elders somewhat remember the battle, though they were only kits or apprentices at the time.

"This is a great threat to our clan, there is no doubt. But even then, our clan was smaller, and we still won. I will try my best to reason with Hazelnose, but I doubt we will reach a consensus. I fear that war may be upon us."

More uproar came from the crowd.

"SnowClan will be stepping up patrols, training our warriors harder. We are preparing for a war-like circumstance. I will try to talk with the other clans to see if we can form allies. If MoonClan wants power like last time, then the other clans will be threatened too.

"And if MoonClan truly is returning, then I must warn you of the severity of the situation. Our clan is no longer safe. I don't want apprentices wandering alone, kits out of the sight of their mothers, and no one looking for MoonClan. They would often fight within our borders as we slowly built up our armies. For now, there has been no attacks, but I have a feeling one will come soon.

"And so for now, I urge you all to remain safe and wait for further

instruction. I know MoonClan appears intimidating, but I have high faith in this clan. SnowClan will not die!" Cloudstar yowled.

Cats yowled in agreement, agreeing to fight to their death if necessary.

Flameclaw turned to Barkfern in horror.

"We really need to talk to Cloudstar then," Barkfern suggested.

Flameclaw nodded and found Cloudstar wobbling back to his den. He appeared as disoriented as they were.

"Cloudstar, we must talk to you!" she shouted.

"I can't speak now," Cloudstar told them.

"It's important," Barkfern urged. "Flameclaw and I are not as young as we used to be. We were going to request to become elders before you made your announcement."

"We promise we aren't doing it to get out of battle. It truly was on our minds before you spoke," Flameclaw urged.

Cloudstar nodded. "Yes, yes. I agree. You two have served SnowClan for a long time and have remained very loyal. You have my permission to move to the elders' den. I'm afraid there will be no announcements about it though. I have more pressing matters."

Flameclaw nodded, understanding of his decision. She turned to Barkfern, and they headed toward the elders' den. As Flameclaw glanced back though at her leader, she couldn't help but feel her stomach twisting into a knot. Was any cat safe now?

Chapter 39

Flameclaw had slowly gotten use to life as an elder, but she wondered if perhaps she had made the decision too soon. It had only been a little over a moon, and so much had changed in SnowClan.

The threat of MoonClan had become larger. Cats sometimes crossed the border, a declaration of an upcoming battle had already been made, and Flameclaw not only feared for her life but for the lives of others. She knew she was safer as an elder, nice and protected in her den, but what about her kits and their families?

A few times, Flameclaw had even suggested to Barkfern that they had made the wrong decision becoming elders and that it was best they become warriors again to help fight. Barkfern told her otherwise and even when Flameclaw spoke to Cloudstar about it, he told her to keep calm.

Still, it was hard to keep calm when the threat of MoonClan seemed to become larger with each passing day. Rumors of an invasion spread around like wildfire, causing Flameclaw to miss sleep at night.

Despite this, she supposed she was suited for an elder now. Her muscles weren't as sore with exercise, and often, the most she'd do is go on a walk with Barkfern, though even those had come to an end shortly due to MoonClan's presence.

Sometimes kits would come to hear stories, and that was always fun. They especially favored Flameclaw's because she had not grown up in SnowClan and could tell them stories they hadn't heard a million times before.

And sometimes the apprentices would bring moss. Flameclaw always tried to be kind and grateful, remembering how much she hated the task as an apprentice. At least she hadn't forced any of the apprentices to pick ticks off of her like some of the other elders.

All in all, it would've been a peaceful life if it hadn't been for MoonClan.

One morning, Flameclaw awoke to find cats walking around early in camp. She stuck her head out the den, trying to listen to their conversation. She picked up a few of their muttered words such as "spotted at the far end again" and "could be a threat" and "won't they fight" and so forth.

She quietly crept out of the den but was stopped by the deputy, Thornfrost.

"Flameclaw, is everything all right?" he asked.

Flameclaw didn't reply, glancing at the other warriors.

"Oh, don't mind them," Thornfrost told her. "We're sorry if we woke you. Night patrol just caught a whiff of some MoonClan scent at the far end of the border, that's all. They hadn't even entered our territory."

"Oh, I was...just checking. Wanted to be sure," she muttered, embarrassed.

"Ah, it's fine. You should get some more sleep."

Flameclaw nodded, though didn't reply.

"Hey, don't worry. Cloudstar knows what he's doing. Everything is under control," he assured her.

The ginger she-cat nodded and turned back to the den. Upon laying back in her nest, however, she found it impossible to get back to sleep.

At last, Barkfern awoke, and they spent the true morning sharing a squirrel together.

"You look tired," Barkfern observed.

"Just had some trouble sleeping, that's all."

Barkfern glanced at her with concern. "I'm worried about you, Flameclaw. You haven't been sleeping well for days."

"I'm worried," she confessed.

"I know, but you have to know that Cloudstar will keep us as safe as possible. And we're not that old yet. We can still fight back if we have to," he assured her.

"But what about our kits? Our grandkits? We can't guarantee their safety," she whimpered.

"That's how the life of a warrior is. They have trained to their best, and if they find themselves under attack, they'll defend themselves to the best of their ability. They are all very well trained. I wouldn't worry," Barkfern said.

"I just don't want this clan to turn into RiverClan," she admitted. "It's become my home."

"This clan is much larger and stronger than RiverClan, and we both know that. It'll be fine. Can you please quit worrying for now?"

"I-I'll try," Flameclaw told him, and she really meant it. She wanted to get her fears out of her head.

They concluded their meal and chat and went off to do other things. Flameclaw laid out in the sun for a while, taking in the warmth. She never had this much free time as a warrior to just bask in the sun.

Her grandkits came and visited her at some point, to which she told stories and asked them how their training was going. They'd be warriors very shortly.

At one point, Flameclaw fell asleep, and she awoke, the sun was just beginning to set. Satisfied that she'd finished the day without a trace of MoonClan in her thoughts, she padded into the elders' den, perhaps to chat with some of the others.

While some of the cats were much older than her, Flameclaw enjoyed speaking with them and was even sometimes intrigued by the stories they'd tell to the kits. The stories were all new to her,

and she longed to know more about SnowClan.

As she laid down in her nest, one of the new apprentices, Badgerpaw, entered into her den carrying moss in her mouth.

"Hello, Badgerpaw," Flameclaw mewed.

"I brought you some moss," the white and black she-cat squeaked.

"Thank you," Flameclaw purred.

She moved aside as the she-cat replaced her old moss with the new. Flameclaw felt it and laid down, letting out a purr.

"It feels delightful. You always get me the best moss."

The she-cat blushed. "Thanks, Flameclaw. You're a lot nicer about it too."

Flameclaw chuckled. "Better keep your voice down...or one of the elders may make you pick off their ticks."

She let out a tiny squeak and nodded. Then, she bounded away laughing, leaving Flameclaw to get comfortable in her new nest.

Barkfern entered shortly after and laid down beside her.

"Where's my new nest?" he asked.

"I guess your apprentice has been lazy," she teased.

He laughed and then glanced at her in all seriousness.

"And were you able to put everything out of your mind today?" he asked.

She nodded. "I took a nice nap too. I'm sorry for getting so worked up earlier. You're right. We are the safest we can be right now. I'll try to think of that from now on."

Barkfern smiled and licked her cheek. "I'm glad you're feeling better. Now let's get some rest."

She nodded and moved closer against him, his fur warming hers. Slowly, she fell asleep.

Chapter 40

The days passed, and Flameclaw knew the battle with MoonClan was rapidly approaching. Over the past few moons, their army had grown bigger, and SnowClan had practiced harder and harder. They'd already pushed back a few invaders, but it seemed like that was nothing like what was to come.

It was hard for Flameclaw to remain with the elders during this time. She was relieved to know that she wasn't the only one who felt this way. Other elders expressed their concern and at times thought they should be doing more. It seemed the queens agreed to.

But they had been told that they must not get involved. It pained Flameclaw to listen to this, but she knew Cloudstar had only enacted this rule in order to keep clan members safe. She knew that the warriors and apprentices could handle MoonClan.

One morning, Flameclaw awoke, startled, to hear the yell of Whiteclaw, one of Cloudstar's sons.

"MOONCLAN IS IN THE MEADOW FOR BATTLE!" he yowled.

The others elders began to stir beside her and were slightly disturbed by this. Flameclaw glanced at Barkfern in concern, knowing that the day had been approaching, but not expecting it so soon. Her mate calmly pressed his tail on her back.

"It'll be okay," he promised.

Flameclaw gulped and nodded, hoping that she'd see all her kits and their families return safely when the battle ended at the end of the day.

"EVERYONE, WE MUST FIGHT!" Cloudstar yowled as all eyes turned on him. A small calico kitten had been playing with his mate, Dovewing, beside him. They had both stopped and looked at

him.

"Leafkit, you stay here," he told the little kitten as she seemed ready to fight. He looked at Dovewing and then turned his attention to the elders' den. "Elders too."

Flameclaw nodded and watched as the other elders rose to their feet, keeping alert just in case.

"I need every medicine cat, apprentice, and warrior," Cloudstar announced. The cats soon left from their dens and gathered around their leader.

"Let's go!" he yowled.

Flameclaw watched as her clan walked away, hoping that they would all return with success.

"May StarClan grant them safety," she murmured. She had longed to say good-bye to her kits, but the cats were already leaving, and there was no time. In a matter of minutes, the camp grew more quiet than it had ever been.

Some of the other elders slowly moved outside for precautionary measures. Flameclaw remained outside the den and watched Dovewing.

"Are you coming in?" Flameclaw asked her friend. The she-cat had moved to the elders' den a little bit before Flameclaw. She was glad to have her friend from the nursery by her side again.

"I'm going to stay with Leafkit," Dovewing announced. She followed the small kitten into the nursery while Flameclaw remained by the elders' den.

For a while, all remained quiet. Flameclaw was able to relax a little, and she eventually came back into the den and lay beside Barkfern who licked her cheek.

"It'll be okay," he said once more.

"I love you," she murmured, rubbing against him.

Barkfern didn't reply but only wrapped his tail around her. They sat for a while with the other elders while others whispered of what they suspected was going on.

The sun fully came to a rise, and Flameclaw wondered how long the battle would last. As soon as this thought crossed her mind, a series of yowls came from the perimeter of the camp.

Flameclaw's eyes widened.

One of the elders, Cottonnose, let out a shriek. "MOONCLAN IS INVADING!"

Flameclaw was shocked. But how? Weren't they in the meadow in battle? There was no time to talk. Quickly, she and the other elders raced out of the den. A few went off to protect the nursery while Flameclaw stood, waiting for battle.

A few dozen MoonClan cats entered into the camp and let out loud hisses.

Snowtail, the mate of Cottonnose, approached one of them angrily. "No! You can't invade!" she hissed, unsheathing her claws. Quickly, one of the MoonClan camps slit her throat, and she fell to the floor, dead.

"NO!" Cottonnose wailed.

Flameclaw turned to Barkfern in shock. Never had she dealt with such bloodthirsty cats before. These cats were here to kill, not to fight.

"Let's fight," he said.

The cats immediately launched into battle, letting out vicious yowls. A black tom threw himself at Flameclaw. She unsheathed her claws and pinned them into his stomach, allowing her to throw him off her. She stood up, out of breath, but still ready to fight. She had forgotten the excitement of battle.

Flameclaw turned and kept an eye on Barkfern who fought nearby. He appeared to be doing well too despite his elder status. She

launched herself at more cats in anger.

"GET OUT OF THE CLAN!" she shouted viciously.

A wail came from Mintfall, another one of the elders. Her son, Rainfoot, who had become an elder not too long ago, lay dead at her feet. His mate, Waterdrop, glanced down sadly beside Mintfall.

"I never thought I'd outlive all my kits," Mintfall mourned.

Flameclaw kept her eyes away from them, not wanting to think of what happened if she saw the dead body of one of her own kits.

Please let them be safe, she thought.

Flameclaw began fighting closer to Dovewing. She was surprised how much vivacity the ginger she-cat possessed. She still fought like a warrior.

A cat suddenly pinned down Dovewing and looked ready to strike when a yowl came from the entrance of the camp.

"GET OFF OF HER!" Flameclaw glanced up and noticed Cloudstar. A bloody wound covered his neck, and she realized he must've lost lives during the real battle. He brought with him several other SnowClan warriors, and a few from other clans.

The MoonClan cat glanced up in surprise and was quickly thrown off of Dovewing.

Another cat suddenly launched itself at Dovewing. She swiped a claw at his ear, though Flameclaw watched as the MoonClan cat used this to his advantage and bit down on her throat. Dovewing let out a convulsive, choking sound.

"Dovewing!" Flameclaw called out in surprise.

Suddenly, she watched as Leafkit wandered out of the nursery.

"Leafkit, get back in the nursery!" Flameclaw snapped.

The calico she-cat ignored her and bit down on the enemy cat's foot,

causing him to yowl. Flameclaw glanced around, noticing that the SnowClan warriors were starting to subdue the MoonClan warriors. She glanced in the crowd, wondering where Barkfern was, but she couldn't see him.

The cat let go of Dovewing, and she fell to the ground, limp.

"P-Protect kit," she stuttered.

Flameclaw immediately grabbed the kit by the scruff and threw her back into the nursery.

"Don't you dare leave this den, you hear?"

"But, Dovewing," Leafkit interjected.

"She'll be fine. I don't want to see you out of this den! I mean it!"

The she-cat shrunk back while Flameclaw turned back to battle. She sighed, knowing she had lied to the kit. She watched as Cloudstar ran to Dovewing's side in shock, and she knew the ginger she-cat did not have much longer to live.

The battle was beginning to die down as a few MoonClan members had dispersed and others were injured. Suddenly, a familiar scream echoed from the middle of the camp. Flameclaw recognized it as Barkfern's.

"Barkfern!" she gasped, running to where she had heard the scream.

As she pushed through cats and fought a few while she was at it, she noticed her mate lying on the ground, breathing oddly.

"Barkfern!" she gasped again, running to his side.

Blood poured down from the tom's throat, and he turned his head slightly, clearly in pain. His eyes were glossy, and his breaths came out raspy. She could tell he was in pain.

Tears gathered in Flameclaw's eyes. "Oh...Barkfern. It's okay. It's okay. We'll get you help," she said, glancing around.

But all the medicine cats had gone to battle. The few remaining MoonClan cats appeared to leave or limp away, leaving just cats on their side remaining.

"F-Flameclaw...I love you," Barkfern told her.

"No, don't die on me!" she snapped. "You can't! You told me everything would be all right!"

But the tom's eyes had gone blank and unseeing. His breaths had stopped, and she knew he was gone. She let out a scream of anguish and pressed her nose into his bloody fur.

"It's not fair!" she shouted. Why had StarClan taken her mate from her? Everything was supposed to be okay.

She glanced up and found Cloudstar saying his good-byes to Dovewing too. The she-cat also appeared at the brink of death. Others meanwhile were licking their wounds or limped injured. Some lay dead on the ground.

Flameclaw let out another cry and then closed her eyes. The battle wasn't meant to come to them.

Chapter 41

Flameclaw would not leave Barkfern's body for a long time. She licked his bleeding wounds and cleaned him up as best as she could, but he did not look like the same Barkfern she'd known that morning. He was in StarClan now, and there was no changing that.

Soon, the other surviving elders moved the rest of the bodies next to each other. Flameclaw was saddened to see Dovewing among the bodies, though she knew the she-cat wouldn't survive. The young calico, Leafkit, seemed heartbroken.

At one point, a large flash of light gleamed through the entire forest. The other cats in the camp seemed confused to what this was, though they supposed an explanation would come soon enough.

Shortly after the giant flash, Flameclaw began to hear voices, and cats began entering into the SnowClan camp. Many were limping or had blood oozing from their wounds. Some, unfortunately, carried dead bodies. Everyone appeared to be exhausted.

A few gasped in shock to see some deceased bodies already piled near the middle of camp. While Cloudstar and some others had known of the invasion, Flameclaw guessed others in battle were not made aware.

She glanced around quickly for her kits and finally watched as they began to appear. Daisyfern and Snowripple padded next to each other. Snowripple had a bit of limp, and Flameclaw could see some wounds on Daisyfern, but both were alive and well.

Goldnose appeared moments later, appearing almost unharmed. She guessed he had fought well in battle. Everyone's mates approached them moments later, and Flameclaw was hit with a pang of sadness, knowing her mate was gone.

She waved her tail to catch her kits' attention. After a short time, they noticed her, and started padding over.

"You look like a mess!" Daisyfern gasped.

"I heard vaguely about the attack on the camp. Are you all right?" Snowripple asked her mother.

Flameclaw nodded, her mouth quivering.

"Where's Barkfern? Is he getting patched up?" Goldnose asked, glancing around.

Flameclaw opened her mouth to speak but let out a cry instead. She glanced down at her paws, tears dripping down.

"Oh, no. No. He's not dead, is he?" Goldnose asked, shocked.

Flameclaw pointed her tail to where his deceased body lay. At once, the three ran over to their dead father and began to mourn as well.

"Did he fight well?" Daisyfern asked sadly as she glanced at her father.

"Very well. But not well enough," Flameclaw sighed.

"I'm so sorry," Snowripple muttered quietly, wrapping her tail around her mother. The other three did the same, and for a little while, they sat and mourned together.

"Goldnose...your kits," Flameclaw spoke up.

"All are fine," Goldnose assured her.

"That's good."

"I heard Dovewing passed away too," Snowripple brought up. "Cloudstar seemed heartbroken."

"You're correct," Flameclaw confirmed. "But they got to say their good-byes, and I think that's all that mattered."

"Did...did you get to say your good-byes?" Goldnose asked

nervously.

"Somewhat. Though not as much as I would've liked," Flameclaw said.

There was a wave of silence, and then Cloudstar's yowl echoed from the top of the rock.

"ALL SNOWCLAN CATS, PLEASE GATHER FOR A CLAN MEETING!" he shouted.

She went to sit down with her kits, guessing they'd be the ones she was closest to now. But who would she go on walks with now? Who would share meals with her? Her kits were busy warriors, and her grandkits too. And even Dovewing, one of her closer friends, had joined StarClan as well.

"Is Cloudstar recapping the battle?" Flameclaw asked, realizing she'd never really asked about it. She had assumed they'd won from the slightly cheerful mood of the cats, though he'd never confirmed it.

Snowripple nodded.

"The battle was hard and long," Cloudstar explained. "MoonClan put up a good fight, and for a moment, I suspected they might win. But we joined with NightClan and FoxClan, and though we suffered many losses of brave cats, we won. But this wouldn't have been possible without Shinypelt."

"Shinypelt?" Flameclaw asked.

"It was so odd," Daisyfern whispered. "She had been in a prophecy from StarClan or something. She stepped out in the middle of battle and told Hazelstar off. Then, the spirit of Moonstar appeared, and Shinypelt was able to vanquish her with this great light."

Flameclaw gasped. "I saw that light!"

Daisyfern nodded. "Moonstar vanished, and so did the MoonClan army. But...Shinypelt died...I think. Her body was lifted up into the air, and a kit came down. It's all very confusing."

"Patchfur, I invite you and your kit up," Cloudstar called.

Flameclaw watched, suddenly intrigued by this story. Shinypelt's mate, Patchfur, padded up the rock holding a newborn kit.

"Since I do not have Shinypelt to thank, I'd like to acknowledge you and your new kit, whom you've named Lifekit. Your mate truly saved this clan," Cloudstar said.

"I-I believe so too, Cloudstar," Patchfur stammered. He, too, appeared very sorrowful, most likely from the loss of his mate.

"We will begin the burial shortly. I would like to ask all of you to remain a few minutes in vigil. Family members may keep vigil for the night," Cloudstar announced.

The cats soon dispersed, and burial began. Flameclaw and her kits helped them bury Barkfern's body. As the sun began to set and the sky was replaced with orange, the entire SnowClan camp sat out and sat in silence for a few moments as they remembered their clanmates.

Once the sky turned dark, many began to head into their dens to sleep. Flameclaw's kits' mates soon stepped inside, as did her grandkits. Flameclaw and her kits intended to remain awake all night to remember Barkfern's presence.

Cats began to disperse, and soon, only close family members were left. Flameclaw was saddened to see Cloudstar and his three kits watching sadly over Dovewing's grave.

"I-I miss when we used to play as kits," Goldnose muttered quietly. "Barkfern was always so fun to play with."

"He always visited us," Snowripple added. "There were so many other cats I knew whose father didn't visit that often."

"He was a good father," Daisyfern agreed.

"He was one of the best friends I ever had," Flameclaw whispered.

They remained silent for a while longer. About halfway through the

night, her kits decided that it would be best to get some rest, especially after a long day of fighting. Despite their pleas for Flameclaw to rest too, she disagreed.

Once they had left, Flameclaw laid down and gazed at the ground.

"I'll miss you, Barkfern," she said. "I don't know if it was coincidence or destiny that you stumbled through that bush on our journey, but I'll never forget that. Thank you for being a good friend, for calming me down, for being a great father. I love you, and maybe someday soon, I'll see you in StarClan."

Finally, sleep began to overtake her, and she shut her eyes and drifted asleep, her nose pressed against the fresh dirt of his grave.

Chapter 42

More moons passed after Barkfern's death. Flameclaw was slowly getting used to the loneliness, but she still often longed for her mate to be by her side. It was hard waking up in the morning with no warm body pressed up against hers.

She and her kits were slowly moving on, but she knew it was easier for her kits. They had mates of their own. Even Goldnose's kits had mates of their own. No doubt they would begin families soon. Flameclaw still wondered if her daughters would ever have kits.

Nevertheless, they did not suffer like Flameclaw did. They had their own duties to keep them busy while Flameclaw lazily sat in the elders' den all day. It was a tiring task, and she was bored out of her mind half the time. No one went on walks with her now or shared squirrels in the morning. Sometimes kits would visit, though it seemed that was becoming more of a rarity.

One morning, Flameclaw laid out in the sun, picking at a mouse. She glanced up at the sky, wondering if Barkfern was ever looking down at her with her other loved ones in StarClan. She let out a sigh and picked some more at her breakfast.

She turned and noticed two kits--a gray tabby she-cat and a dark gray tom--playing happily with each other. She immediately recognized them as Mistyfrost and Speckledfoot's kits, Silverkit and Fogkit. She smiled a little watching them, remembering her own kits playing.

Flameclaw suddenly watched their mother, Mistyfrost, tense up. Flameclaw turned and stood up slowly, watching two unknown she-cats pad into the camp. One was pure white with gray around her muzzle while the other was more of a golden color. They appeared her age, and Flameclaw knew she shouldn't be frightened of them, but her mind raced back to the MoonClan's attack, and she tensed, wondering if they were under attack.

Flameclaw turned and watched Mistyfrost wrap her tail around the two kits while Cloudstar immediately approached the cats.

"Who are you?" Cloudstar hissed. He too seemed to fear these were MoonClan cats.

"My name is Snowgaze," the white she-cat said. "And this is my sister, Fernstep. We heard that our brother recently passed. His name was Barkfern."

Flameclaw pricked her ears and immediately padded over to the two.

"You're Barkfern's sisters!" she gasped. "Fernstep, Barkfern asked for his warrior name to be named after you. Our kit, Snowripple, is named after you, Snowgaze. Have you come to join the clan?"

Immediately she was filled with excitement. Perhaps she wouldn't be alone anymore. Perhaps she'd have more friends in the elders' den. And even better, they were related to Barkfern! They wouldn't replace him, sure, but it'd be nice to talk to his relatives.

The sisters, unfortunately, shook their heads.

"We have come to show our respects," Fernstep explained.

Suddenly, Flameclaw watched as Silverkit squeezed out of her mother's grip and ran over to them.

"Hi!' she mewed, her tail waving back and forth.

"Silverkit! Come back here!" Mistyfrost called from the nursery.

Fernstep let out a mrrowl of laughter watching Silverkit.

"Where are you from?" Cloudstar asked. "RiverClan? I know Flameclaw and Barkfern are from RiverClan."

Snowgaze shook her head. "No our mother left us three in the small clan of LightningClan moons ago. It was a small clan, consisting of a few warriors, us three as the apprentices, and a crazy medicine cat who fell in love with the leader. One day, dogs attacked the camp,

and Barkfern led them away. He never returned. We always believed that he had died until fairly recently," Snowgaze sighed.

Flameclaw gasped. "I remember him speaking about leaving LightningClan on the quest. My, that was many moons ago. I can't believe I still remember it."

Fernstep let out a nod. "We left LightningClan shortly after and lived as rogues. Not once did we leave each other's side. We had no mates or kits, and we only had a small flicker of hope that our brother was alive."

Silverkit's eyes widened. She was obviously intrigued by the story.

"It's a shame you didn't get to spend a lot of time with him," Flameclaw sighed. She then paused, realizing something. "Oh my! I forgot to introduce myself! I'm Flameclaw. I am...or I was Barkfern's mate. When I was on my giant quest in RiverClan, Barkfern leapt out of the bushes, and that's how we met! It's scared me so much! He asked to join us. He was a RiverClan member for a fairly short time since our camp got raided on. We were rogues, and then I was expecting his kits, so we joined SnowClan and we've been there ever since. KITS!" Flameclaw yowled.

Snowripple, Daisyfern, and Goldnose exited the warriors den and came to their mother in confusion.

"This is Snowripple," Flameclaw said, pointing to the white she-cat. "And Daisyfern, and our only son, Goldnose."

Goldnose dipped his head.

"Oh, they're lovely!" Snowgaze exclaimed. "We're your father's sisters. It's a pleasure to meet all of you."

Cloudstar tilted his head, glancing at Silverkit.

"Silverkit? How long have you been here?" he asked.

Silverkit waved her fluffy silver tail. "My mom was born in RiverClan too!" she squeaked

That's when Mistyfrost padded out. "Silverkit, it's not nice to eavesdrop. Nowapologize to these nice cats."

Silverkit groaned. "But Mommm! I wanna hear their stories!"

Mistyfrost licked Silverkit's ear. "I'm pretty sure they want to be alone." Mistyfrost dipped her head to Cloudstar. "Sorry about that. It's not like I can actually watch them, right?" she chuckled. Flameclaw laughed slightly, realizing she was making a blind joke. Mistyfrost had been blinded as a young kit, though it didn't seem to keep her from being a warrior.

"Aw, let her hear some stories, Mom," Daisyfern said. "I know you have lots of interesting ones to tell."

Flameclaw smiled, absolutely thrilled to share stories.

"Yes, I do have a lot. Do you want to hear some, Silverkit? ?If you do, head to the elder's den. I'll be there in a second. I just need to point Barkfern's sisters to his grave first."

Silverkit's icy blue eyes brightened. "Can I mom? Pleeaassseee?"

Mistyfrost just couldn't say no. "As long as you bring your brother with." Silverkit ran to the nursery to get Fogkit. Mistyfrost laughed a bit, then followed her speeding kit.

"Rambunctious things," Fernstep said as the kit padded away. "I'm somewhat glad I didn't have any."

"Oh, but they're a joy," Flameclaw assured her. "Let me show you Barkfern's grave."

She padded with them to the recently dug graves and found Barkfern's in a heartbeat. She glanced down at it and tapped it lightly with her paw.

"I am glad he lived a long life. We didn't hear all the details of his death though. What happened?" Snowgaze asked.

"Camp invasion," Flameclaw sighed. "There were only elders and queens and kits in the nursery when they attacked. We tried our

hardest to protect the camp, but it became difficult."

"I'm glad he died courageously," Fernstep said.

Flameclaw nodded. "Me too."

There was a silence among them, and the sisters sat down.

"I'll leave you two to reflect," Flameclaw told them. She was saddened once more by Barkfern, but her heart lifted to think of the two kits waiting to hear stories.

She padded away from the sisters and happily padded to the elders' den, ready to relive some of her memories.

Chapter 43

As Flameclaw left Barkfern's sisters to pay their respects, she padded happily over to the nursery, excited to share some more of her stories. Kits had been coming less often to hear them, and she found she enjoyed having someone to talk to.

Flameclaw entered the den and found Silverkit and Fogkit waiting excitedly to hear her tales. They looked up at her with gleaming eyes, and their tails moved quickly in anticipation.

"Are you ready to hear a story?" she asked, sitting down across from them.

Both Silverkit and Fogkit nodded eagerly.

"Did I ever tell you the story of when I jumped off the biggest cliff?" Flameclaw asked, supposing that would be a good one.

Silverkit and Fogkit both gasped and shook their heads.

"What? Impossible!" Fogkit retorted.

Flameclaw shook her head.

"I had found the RiverClan leader and we were under attack. An evil she-cat named Korosu was after us!" Flameclaw exclaimed. "You see a RiverClan cat named Snowheart had been fighting with the she-cat, and her kit, Runningkit, had gone over the edge of a giant cliff. Snowheart had leapt after him. It was then we had a decision to make. The leader, Goldstar, and my friend, Rosepettle, and a kittypet who had joined us along the way named Neko, were going to jump over the cliff to save Snowheart and her kit. My other friend, Mothwing, who was a medicine cat, was going to journey

home. I had a choice to make. Leave my friends behind and fail my quest or save my friends? Mothwing left, and I leapt over the cliff. It was a long way down, and I didn't think I would survive. But soon, I touched the ground and saw that my friends were safe too."

Both Silverkit and Fogkit seemed very excited by this story. Silverkit then let out a big grin.

"I want to be a warrior like you when I'm older!" she mewed. She batted Fogkit with her paw. "Grr!" she giggled.

Flameclaw chuckled.

"I've had an exciting life," she admitted. "Butit was dangerous too. My clan was lost to a dark clan. SwampClan failed thoughand my clan was gone...I was a rogue, and I actually lived with some wild dogsand wolves at one time. But I was expecting kits, and I had to make sure theywere safe, so Barkfern and I traveled here, and I've been here ever since."

Fogkit's eyes widened in disbelief. "YOU LIVED WITH WILD DOGS AND WOLVES?!"

"We were an odd clan," Flameclaw said, chuckling. "It was me, Barkfern, the RiverClan deputy at the time named Troutfin (she died very recently because of her old age). There was Tigerstripe, but he left...And then there was Seven--he was a mutt. And then there was Holly and Rose—two puppies. And then there was Lupin and Breeze—the two were mates. Eventually, Breeze had pups, so that was another five added." Flameclaw grinned, thinking of all those animals. She somewhat missed them.

Fogkit laughed. "That is an odd clan!"

"Imagine if SnowClan lived with dogs! We could win all the battles!" Silverkit declared.

"We won't live with dogs," Fogkit yowled at his sister.

"Who died and made you leader?" Silverkit growled.

"Calm down, kits," Flameclaw said, not wanting to start any fights.

Silverkit sent an icy glare at Fogkit before she finally quieted.

"How about I tell you the story of how I was chosen to go on a quest," Flameclaw suggested.

"I hope I get chosen for a quest!" Silverkit squeaked.

"Please tell!" Fogkit begged. The two seemed very interested in Flameclaw now.

"Well, early one day, one of the elders, No-Claw, told me about Gingerkit. Apparently, she was Goldstar's favorite kit. But one day, Gingerkit got sick and wouldn't eat...she died. That night, I was visited by Gingerkit. She might've died as a kit, but she sure sounded like the wisest cat I'd ever heard. She told me that Goldstar was in danger and I had to rescue her. That morning I found out that Goldstar, Daisyflower, Snowheart, and Mothwing were missing. It was Rosepettle who accompanied me when we left."

Flameclaw thought back to Rosepettle and Goldstar and the others. She hoped Barkfern was speaking to them in StarClan. She supposed it would be great to see all of them again. She missed her RiverClan clanmates dearly.

"Cool!" Silverkit mewed.

"Sounds more exciting than here," Fogkit muttered unhappily.

"There is a lot of excitement in SnowClan too," Flameclaw assured him.

"But no wild dogs," Silverkit sighed.

"Well, perhaps that's a good thing," Flameclaw said, laughing slightly.

At that moment, Mistyfrost poked her silver head into the elders den.

"Come on, kits. It's time to go," she meowed. "You don't want to overstay your welcome."

Silverkit groaned. "Aw..."

"You're always welcome to come back," Flameclaw assured the young kit. Both Fogkit and Silverkit thanked Flameclaw for her stories and then headed back with their mother. Flameclaw smiled, glad she had been able to reminisce on the past. Her mind was suddenly filled with RiverClan, and she thought of it fondly. She sighed, missing Barkfern now more than ever.

Thinking of Barkfern, she headed back out of the elders den to see that Snowgaze and Fernstep were just wrapping up. She approached them and smiled.

"Hello, Flameclaw. Thank you for your warm greeting," Snowgaze said. "We're just about ready to head off."

"Are you sure you don't want to stay?" Flameclaw asked one last time. "It's very nice here, and you don't even have to hunt for your own prey as an elder."

Fernstep laughed. "That is nice, but we've been rogues so long, we can't imagine settling down again."

"It was nice to pay our respects and see our kin. I think you made Barkfern very happy," Snowgaze told her.

Flameclaw grinned. "I hope so too."

"The kits are lovely," Fernstep purred. "Though I wish one of them would have had my brother's brown pelt."

"All the same, it was very nice to meet them too," Snowgaze said.

"I am glad you were able to find us," Flameclaw replied. "It was nice to speak to one of Barkfern's family members."

"Well...best of luck to you," Fernstep said, patting Flameclaw's shoulder with her tail.

"Are you leaving?" Cloudstar asked from behind Flameclaw.

Snowgaze nodded. "Thank you for allowing us in, Cloudstar. It was

nice to see our brother one last time."

Cloudstar nodded and dipped his head.

"Kits, come say good-bye!" Flameclaw called. They were all chatting by the fresh-kill pile. They rose and padded over to their mother and greeted the two sisters.

"It was nice to meet some new kin," Goldnose said. "Thank you for coming."

"I wish we'd gotten to know you better," Snowripple sighed.

"Me too," Fernstep replied.

"All the same, I'm glad to know you two were alive and well," Flameclaw said. "Barkfern never thought you survived."

"And we didn't either. But one day we'll be united again," Snowgaze said, glancing up at the sky.

Flameclaw smiled. "Of course," she said. "One day..." She gazed up at the sky too, wondering when that day would be, and if it would be soon. She didn't want to admit it, but she was becoming anxious. There was very little left for her to do here in SnowClan.

She and her kits said good-bye to Snowgaze and Fernstep one last time and escorted them outside of the camp. While her kits headed back to their warrior duties, Flameclaw sat at the edge of the camp and watched them go, sad to see her one chance of company walking away.

Still, she knew it was too much to ask of Snowgaze and Fernstep to stay when they had just met. She guessed she had seen a lot of Barkfern in them and hoped they would be enough to fill the gap. Sighing, she returned back in to camp.

As she padded to the elders den, she noticed Fogkit and Silverkit padding alongside Mistyfrost.

"I want to be just like Flameclaw when I grow up!" Silverkit exclaimed.

Flameclaw smiled at this remark and suddenly felt a lot better. She hoped the two would be back to visit sometime soon. She then padded into the elders den and curled up in her nest, memories of RiverClan swarming in her head.

Chapter 44

It had been many moons since Barkfern's sisters had made their visit and Mistyfrost's kits had come to hear stories of Flameclaw. For the rest of their time in the nursery, Flameclaw kept them entertained with stories. But now they were past being apprentices. They had recently become warriors, and Flameclaw still sat alone in the elders den.

But she was not too upset at this. Her days had become more peaceful. Usually she wouldn't wander past the fresh-kill pile. She enjoyed naps in the sun and watching kits play with their mothers. She enjoyed watching apprentice and warrior ceremonies, fondly remembering hers.

Often, her kits would visit her. She knew they were becoming concerned about her. She moved slower every day and ate less and less despite her kits attempting to shove food down her throat. But Flameclaw wasn't hungry. Besides, she rarely exercised her muscles anymore.

Flameclaw was soon the oldest she-cat in the elders den. She was told she should be proud of this accomplishment, and she was, but she was becoming more tired as the days stretched on and on.

Flameclaw awoke on a peaceful new-leaf morning one day. As she opened her eyes, faint rays of sunlight shone into the den. She smiled and let out a yawn. Today felt special for some reason, more peaceful than normal.

She slowly rose to a sit and glanced around. Many of the other elders were beginning to stir too. Some went and gathered fresh-kill while others continued to lay in their nests, simply content with laying about.

Flameclaw extended a paw to go get some breakfast when Snowripple appeared at the door holding a dead mouse in her jaws.

"Good morning, Mother," she said, dropping the mouse at her feet. "I didn't want you walking so far. I figured I'd bring you breakfast."

"That's very kind of you, Snowripple," Flameclaw said, though she figured it wouldn't have been hard to walk a few steps to the fresh-kill pile.

"Eat up," Snowripple said, sitting down beside her.

Flameclaw obeyed and ate most of the mouse, then glanced up at her daughter.

"You're visiting awful early," she observed. She was used to her kits coming to see her after their duties were performed for the day.

"I actually wanted to talk to you," Snowripple said.

"About what?" Flameclaw asked. She hoped it wasn't about her health. She was sick to death of hearing about that.

"I-I'm expecting Cloudwind's kits," she admitted.

Flameclaw let out a gasp. It had been many moons since Goldnose's kits had become warriors. Some of them even had families of her own. She had never expected any kits from her daughters.

"Congratulations," she purred. "I'm sure you will make a great mother."

"Thanks," Snowripple said, grinning. "I-I haven't told Cloudwind yet. Do you think he'll be upset? We never really planned to have kits."

Flameclaw laughed and shook her head. "I never expected to have kits at the time I did either. But Barkfern was thrilled. I'm sure Cloudwind will be too."

"I hope so," Snowripple replied.

"Go tell him now," Flameclaw urged.

"Are you sure?" Snowripple asked. "Don't you want me to keep you company a little longer?"

"I'll be fine," Flameclaw assured her. "Now go see him!" she said, shoving her daughter forward.

Snowripple let out a gentle smile and padded away from the elders den. Flameclaw smiled, her body becoming warm and fuzzy. She was glad her daughter was having kits. She knew she'd make a great mother.

Snowripple returned with her siblings later that evening, explaining how Cloudwind had been thrilled. Together, they shared squirrels together and celebrated the near arrival of more kits. While Snowripple seemed a bit embarrassed, Flameclaw could tell she was thrilled.

There was something special about that evening. She had never felt more happy sitting outside in the sunset's glow, laughing and celebrating with her kits. She loved them so much, and she'd never felt so united as a family.

If only Barkfern were here, she thought to herself as the festivities came to an end.

She wished her kits goodnight and told them she loved them then padded into the elders den for some well-deserved rest. As she plumped down on her nest, she felt a calmness spread over her. Her muscles felt less sore, her breaths became more full and even, and she felt reality slowly drifting away from her as she fell asleep.

Then, she dissolved into nothingness.

When Flameclaw's eyes opened once more, she felt more calm than she had before. The dark walls of the elders den had been replaced by luscious trees and a bluish glow, and she knew at once where she was.

"StarClan," she breathed.

Her body felt light and young again, and she felt as if she could climb any tree or run any distance.

"It's about time you came," came a sound behind her.

She turned and let out a laugh.

"Goldstar!" she exclaimed. She rushed to her old leader and embraced her, watching as more cats stepped out into the StarClan's glow. There was Mothwing, her parents, Rosepettle, Snowheart, all her old clanmates.

"I've been waiting," came one last voice.

Flameclaw turned, watching as Barkfern appeared now. Tears gathered in her eyes.

"Barkfern..."

He approached her and let out his familiar grin, one that she had missed for so long.

She nuzzled him gently. "I missed you so much.'

"But I was always with you," Barkfern assured her.

"Snowripple...did you know that she's--"

"Yes," Barkfern replied.

Flameclaw glanced down and sighed. "Do you think she'll be upset I won't see the kits?"

Barkfern shook his head. "I think she'll be fine. You're here now with the ones who love you. I think Snowripple understands that too."

Flameclaw purred and rubbed her head against her mate. "I love you," she purred.

"I love you, too," he replied.

Together, they padded back towards her old clanmates and family members, ready to embrace an eternity of love and peace.

Author's Note

Dear Reader,

Thank you so much for sticking with me while I wrote the Flamepaw series. It was such a delight to take a step back into the past and recover old role-play comments and plots. I enjoyed writing this series, and I hope you enjoyed it too!

It is also my great pleasure to say that I have completed my last Warriors series. *Flamepaw's Destination* and *The Search for Jetfur* are the final two Warriors books I am working on, and now, by finishing Flamepaw, I have finished my last Warriors series. Bittersweet it is, but I am so appreciative of all your comments and likes and the hard work I put into this.

Flamepaw was the first character I ever role-played way back in 2010, and it was the first fanfiction I attempted to write. After writing other works of fanfiction, I decided to come back to this work, and I'm glad I did. I revamped it and am proud of the results.

Besides thanking you, my readers, though, I would also like to thank collie7225 on YouTube who role-played majority of the RiverClan cats and characters in this series. This story would not have taken off if it hadn't been for her. Check out her channel here: https://www.youtube.com/user/collie7225

Once again, thank you all so much for your support while writing these two novels. I could not have done it without you guys.

Keep on reading!

~Maeve